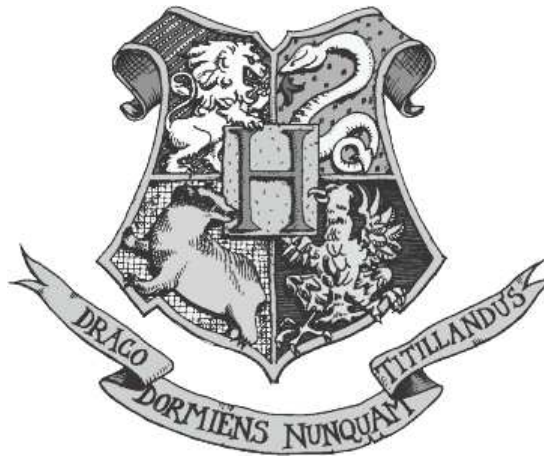


After the End

(a post-Hogwarts tale)



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(a post-Hogwarts tale by Arabella and Zsenya)

With... much, much, much assistance from B Bennett, ElanorGamgee, Honeychurch, Jedi Boadicea, Lallybroch and Moey and many, many, many others...We can't possibly tell, at this point, who suggested what, so we'll just admit up front that we can't take all the credit for ourselves.

Spoilers The first four canon books.

Summary It's the summer after seventh year, and Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and the rest of the wizarding world must learn to live without fear.

Warning This story will be rated R for mature themes, some violence, angst, and language, at intervals. Harry, Ron and Hermione are now eighteen, and will be acting their age. Also, though we have done our very best to stay as close to JK Rowling's world and canon, we've had to skip ahead three years and create that history for ourselves. That said, we welcome you to enjoy this—we sure have.

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Prologue

Writing History

"Should anyone do me the honor to read these pages, I will satisfy his or her curiosity..."

—Susan Mathiot Gale, appending her diary in 1868, nine years after she finished using it.

Hermione Granger had never felt more like she was in a dream than at this moment. The Hogwarts grounds were covered in a thick, purple-grey fog—the result of too much magic in one place at one time. She reflected that there was no way that Muggles in nearby villages would miss the glow in the nighttime sky and she made a note to try to find a Muggle newspaper in the morning, if she could.

Harry was sitting on the ground, propped up against a large fallen limb of the Whomping Willow. He was alive. He had defeated Voldemort. They'd *all* defeated Voldemort. Sirius was sitting with him—neither was speaking, and neither looked truly happy. She didn't feel happy herself yet. Ron, sporting a few scrapes and a nasty gash on his shoulder, but no other injuries, had gone off with his father to help clear away bodies, capture Death Eaters who were in too much shock to Disapparate, and to round up the injured. Neville Longbottom was helping Professor Sprout dig through the wrecked greenhouses to try to salvage some medicinal plants. Hermione was supposed to be helping Ginny Weasley perform Healing Charms on those who the rescue teams returned to the patch of ground that they had turned into a makeshift infirmary.

But no one really seemed to need help. Everywhere she looked, as she walked across the grounds, people were already sleeping, wearing bandages, and being comforted by loved ones. Lavender Brown had her arms around a sobbing Seamus Finnigan. Padma Patil was cleaning a wound on her sister Parvati's leg. Hermione stumbled a bit as she walked, as though she had put on Harry's glasses and was seeing things out of focus.

"What was it like, Gran? When it ended, how did you feel?" Hermione began an inner monologue with herself. She felt, much as she had ever since she had entered Hogwarts, that she should be recording what was going on, that she was a part of history, that what she had been through *meant* something. She tried to distance herself—to pretend like all of this was fifty years in the past. The red-headed grandchild on her knee wanted an answer, and she challenged herself to tell the story correctly.

"DON'T TOUCH HIM!" The scream awoke Hermione from her imaginings and squinting into the distance, she saw Draco Malfoy's familiar white-blond head. He was bent over a gray heap on the ground, and waving his arms to keep the team of wizards and witches that had approached him at bay. His father... Hermione felt a pang of sympathy for Draco; she knew what it was like to have your parents torn away from you. Then she remembered that Draco's father was the one responsible for her own parents' condition, although at least they were still alive. She watched, detached, as Draco stumbled to his feet. "I'll take him home," he hissed. Draco muttered a spell, and then hoisted Lucius Malfoy's limp body over his shoulder, as if he weighed no more than a feather. She had no idea where Draco planned to go to *get* back home, but she supposed he was going to walk to Hogsmeade and look for a fireplace.

She watched Draco a moment longer, and then turned back to face Hogwarts. The castle itself was still standing. She found herself drawn to it, and imagined that she could hear it speaking to her. Slowly, she trudged towards it, turning her head every few steps to make sure she wasn't

'Writing History': A Harry Potter Fanfiction by Zsenya. This story fits into the "After the End" universe. Credit to Arabella for Perscribus, Godric Gryffindor and the creation of the ceiling in the Great Hall and for Hermione's diary, of course. All of the characters belong to JK Rowling.

This story is dedicated to all of the people who decided to write diaries, letters, and stories and to all of their ancestors who chose to save them. They make my job very enjoyable.

Thank you to Elanor Gamgee and Arabella for beta-reading.

being followed—she couldn't shake the feeling that this was not yet over. When she drew closer, she saw that the building had not escaped damage. The lower levels were pockmarked with darkened holes where curses had missed people and bounced off the stone. Scorch marks formed a sloppy pattern that seemed to continue to the tops of the turrets. She climbed the main stairs towards the Entrance Hall, and held her breath as she stuck her head around the enormous open wooden doors to look inside.

It wasn't as bad as she had imagined. It was—messy. Hogwarts, as she had known it, had always been kept impeccably clean by the house-elves. Now she was greeted by the site of several dozen house-elves quietly going about trying to re-hang tapestries on the walls and repair broken torches. Hermione marveled for a moment at the skill of the house-elf magic—most were still without wands, yet they managed to levitate and move items with little effort.

Walking towards the Great Hall, she felt as though she were a character in a story. The house-elves didn't seem to notice her presence and she had the impression that she might be able to slide through one of the walls like a ghost if she really put her mind to it. As soon as the thought crossed her mind, Nearly Headless Nick floated through the doors to the Great Hall, a somber expression on his face. A cold breeze surround her when he halted, blocking her way.

"How bad is it?" she asked. No point in pretending that there would be anything good to see inside—the battle had started in there.

He shook his head slowly—it wobbled where it sat upon his neck. "Miss Granger, I have been at Hogwarts for over 450 years, and I have never, ever seen anything..."

Hermione held up her hand and said, "I want to see."

"I really do not think ..."

But Hermione stepped around him, and with a heave, pushed open one of the doors. What she saw made the first tears appear in her eyes.

The Great Hall was a mess as well. Two of the four long tables were overturned and two were broken entirely in half. Melted wax from the candles that usually floated above their heads coated everything in a thick, pasty film. There was food all over the floor. Peeves was bobbing up and down in a corner, emitting a nervous sort of laugh, most likely amazed, for once, that he was not the cause of the disaster. Hermione had left the Hall almost as soon as the battle had begun; she and Ron, along with Ginny, Remus and Sirius had formed a tight circle around Harry, and Harry had done his best to break away from them, despite all of their earlier talks and preparation. She shivered. It was breezy in the room. She looked up and saw the entire ceiling mimicking the purple mist from outside.

"*Tell us about Hogwarts!*" Her most vivid memory, her most *magical* memory, was of that ceiling. She'd often wondered how detailed the mirage in the ceiling was—if a bird flew above outside, would they see it depicted above their heads? She'd looked, and decided that the ceiling only copied the weather, and not anything else. And the mist wasn't really *weather*—it was more like a bird, flying temporarily across the dark sky. Hermione squinted and stepped on top of one of the benches to get a closer look. She couldn't believe what she was seeing.

Half of the ceiling was gone. The violet fog was slowly drifting down towards the floor. For the first time, Hermione could tell that the ceiling in the Great Hall was merely a mirage. The real sky was obvious and overpowering.

How would they fix it? She'd read, in *Hogwarts: A History* about the construction of the ceiling, about how Godric Gryffindor himself had painted it, and then the four founders had used their combined magic to bring it to life. Who existed in the present with so much power? There must be a way to repair everything—to make it work, to turn it into a place where her children and grandchildren would someday learn.

With new purpose, Hermione turned on her heel and rushed out of the Great Hall.

"*Lumos.*" She let the light from her wand guide her up the many familiar staircases, and as she climbed into the depths of the castle, the damage was minimal, and she could pretend that she was out late, running after Harry or Ron as they attempted to do something that would most likely get them all in trouble.

The Fat Lady was talking quietly with her friend Vi when Hermione approached the portrait hole.

"Is it true? Is You-Know-Who really defeated?" the Fat Lady asked.

Hermione nodded and the Fat Lady let out an exclamation of glee.

"As Head Girl, I'd like to change the password."

The Fat Lady nodded. Hermione gave the old password, uttered the spell and then, "Bloody hell!" Vi giggled and the Fat Lady opened her eyes wide but Hermione ignored them and climbed through the portrait hole. She still couldn't shake the feeling that someone might be following her. There was only one person whom she'd want to admit into Gryffindor Tower on this evening, and he'd

figure out the password soon enough.

Being inside the common room felt like stepping back in time many years. Hermione could barely believe that just a week earlier, they'd been in there studying for exams. She couldn't believe that on the morning of this same day she'd woken in her bed, come downstairs, looked out of the window and seen green and sunlight. There was no fire burning in the fireplace and the torches had not been lit. She was in too much of a hurry to light them, and she ran up the stairs to her dormitory by the soft glow of her wand.

Her room remained as she had left it, and she quickly conjured a small bluebell flame and circled the room to light the torches. She blinked at the brightness, even though the room was relatively dim, and then threw herself across her bed, reaching for her bedside table. There, underneath several quills and pieces of parchment, was what she needed. *Hogwarts: A History*.

She pulled the whole pile onto the bed with her and sat up, cradling the heavy book on her knees. Hermione opened the thick book from the already-loose rear cover, and flipped back a few pages. She read:

Chapter 387 **The Death of Dumbledore**

Entry by Minerva McGonagall (1917 -), Gryffindor, Headmistress, Professor, Quidditch Captain, Registered Animagus

Professor McGonagall had submitted the last chapter almost immediately following Dumbledore's dramatic disappearance on the banks of the Hogwarts lake. Hermione's copy had been automatically magically updated at the end of the summer following her fifth year.

Who would write the next chapter? Professor McGonagall again? From the look of the devastation on the grounds, in the Entrance Hall, and in the Great Hall, Hermione figured that the Headmistress would have plenty of other tasks to keep her busy in the coming months. Besides, Professor McGonagall had not been present for *everything*. Even in this last chapter, there were bits and pieces that weren't entirely accurate. Hermione stopped for a moment to consider the imperfections of history in general. This book in front of her had been her guide, her comfort, her security. And yet, over and over, the older she grew, she had found pieces of information that didn't quite make sense, that didn't fit. All history was biased and tainted. House-elves were evidence of that. But the future was pure and unblemished. And in order for her to think about that, she had to first document the thoughts fighting for time in her head.

Hermione scooted closer to her bedside table and opened a bottle of ink. Using *Hogwarts: A History* as a hard surface, she unrolled the end of a half-used roll of parchment. It should be enough, she thought, and then she could start her future with a new roll. And there was so much she had to do—this was her seventh year, and it was essentially over. She had to find a job, a place to live, and a cure for her parents... but first...

Chapter 388 **The End of Voldemort**

As soon as she wrote the name, she turned her head and quickly surveyed the room. It was deafeningly quiet. She'd never actually *written* the name, although she'd got herself in the habit of saying it, when necessary.

Entry by Hermione Granger, Gryffindor, Head Girl, Member: Order of the Phoenix

And she began to write.

* * * * *

Hermione didn't know, or care, how much time had passed. Her fingers ached, her quill was dull, her writing sloppy. With every sentence, she felt her strength and her mind return to her. She was nearly at the end of the roll, and nearly done with her story. She didn't hear Ron stumble through the portrait hole downstairs and eventually push open the door to her dormitory. She jumped when she heard a voice ask, "What the *hell* do you think you're doing?"

Ron was standing in the doorway, his face half covered by shadows. He looked so much older than he had when she'd last seen him on the grounds. She still hadn't quite grown used to the fact that he was eighteen and not a child anymore. When she looked at him, she almost always saw the floppy red hair, sheepish smile, and mass of freckles that marked him as a Weasley. *Do I really look*

like Grandpa? Now she saw a tall young man, hair short, but still bright, and clear blue eyes that were now looking at her with frustration.

All she could do was smile at him. Looking at him made her happy. "Just one minute," she said softly. "I'm almost done."

And with that, she dipped her quill in the inkbottle one last time, ignored Ron's loud sigh, and finished her sentence.

"There," she said, placing the parchment and quill back on her bedside table, "now we can talk. I see you figured out the password."

"Wasn't hard," Ron said, his voice sounding strained. "I just wish I'd been there when you set it."

Hermione smiled, and motioned to him to sit next to her on the bed. "I think it surprised the Fat Lady as well, but this is a time for new things to happen."

Ron let out a short laugh. "So you've made a resolution to start swearing?" He sat on the edge of her bed, not quite next to her. Hermione looked at the rip in his robes, and noticed that the gash on his shoulder was no longer there.

"What happened?" she asked, scooting over to get a closer look. "Did Madam Pomfrey heal it that quickly?"

"No, it was Fawkes. He started following McGonagall around the grounds and helping." Ron reached up to touch the exposed skin. "Feels like nothing ever happened."

Hermione reached up to touch it as well. Ron caught her hand in his and held onto it tightly. He took a deep, visible breath, and said in a tone that was low, and almost threatening, "Now tell me, what the hell was so important that you had to run away like that? I came back with Dad and no one had seen you. Ginny didn't know where you were. Harry didn't know. There are still Death Eaters who got away, you know. I thought..."

He stopped. He was squeezing her hand so tightly that it was starting to hurt. Ron was looking at her as if she was a ghost and she realized why he was upset.

"Oh," she said softly, drawing even closer to him and putting an arm around his waist, but not pulling her other hand away from his. "I-I just had to leave. It was all too much like a dream and I had to take myself to someplace that was untouched. I should have told someone, but I didn't even th—" She stopped herself, but what she had been about to say was not lost on Ron. He snorted.

"You didn't *think*? Is that what you were going to say? Wait." He held up his wand, which he still clenched tightly in his other hand. "*Perscribus*," he said solemnly and held his wand up to her mouth. "Now, say it again."

"I won't," she said stubbornly, pushing the wand out of the way. "Turn it off."

Ron laughed in earnest this time. She could feel his muscles relax. "Nice to see that making fun of me is calming you down," she said, feigning anger. Ron released her hand and drew her into an embrace. She heard him mutter into her hair, "Hermione, you have to *promise* me that you won't let anything happen to you. Don't go running off. Don't think you're protected. We could have died tonight as well, but just because we made it doesn't mean everything is over. I've seen more dead people tonight than I ever care to see again in my life."

Hermione ran her hands up and down his back. "I know," she answered. "Me too."

Ron's voice sounded very thick when he answered. "I kept thinking—I mean, what would I feel like if one of those bodies was you? I was almost sick. And then, when I didn't see you anywhere.... What were you writing anyway? What was so important? Couldn't your diary wait until morning?"

Hermione knew that Ron had always been a bit jealous of her diary. She pulled away from him, blushing slightly. "I wasn't writing in my diary," she answered. Sighing, she asked, "Do you promise not to laugh?"

"Yes," answered Ron, shaking his head.

She reached for the roll of parchment and handed it to him. Ron read in silence for a few seconds, and she watched him purse his lips, trying to hold in his laughter. She tried to get annoyed with him and found she couldn't do it. She laughed, and Ron let out a loud snort. Soon they were both laughing so hard that they fell back on the bed and it was several minutes before either could speak.

"I'll always be competing with that damned book, won't I?"

"Watch your language, Ron."

"Oh, so it's okay for *you* to swear..."

"It's not okay, and I'll never do it again," she said primly.

Ron rolled over and propped himself up on one elbow. "Hermione," he said, reaching for her hand again, "do you think that now... things will start to be... normal?"

This time it was Hermione who snorted. "Normal?" she asked. "What's normal? I don't think I

even know.”

“This, for starters,” he answered and leaned forward to kiss her. All her remaining anxiety was replaced by a feeling that she was flying. She reached out to pull him closer to her, and they remained there for quite a while, enjoying the feeling of being young, alive, and in love.

Most importantly, they were, for the first time, without fear.

Expecto Sacrificum

“I swear to die for you, Harry. I love you.” Hermione’s voice was clear, and the bluebell flame flickered in the center of the circle, near her feet. She held his hand tightly, and Harry was amazed to see, by the look in her face, that she meant what she was saying. He knew that she had to mean it—otherwise this spell would never have any effect. But hearing those words issue from Hermione in such a serious way caused a more powerful reaction in Harry than he had anticipated.

With her free hand, Hermione raised her wand and touched it to his scar. “In nomine *Expecto Sacrificum*.” Harry shuddered to feel her promise transferring through what had once been nothing but his curse scar. Now it was a conduit, and this was working—he could feel the beginnings of the new magic taking shape within him. He nodded at Hermione, who was shining with hope as she stepped back into the circle.

Ron stepped forward next, his blue eyes grave. He clapped a hand firmly on Harry’s shoulder and bent down to look his friend dead in the face. “I swear to die for you, Harry. I love you.” The words had always been there, but spoken aloud they were a shock to both young men, and Ron’s voice was hoarse. His eye-contact, however, was steady and there was strong belief in his gaze. “In nomine *Expecto Sacrificum*,” he said, touching his wand to Harry’s scar. The spell spread and deepened in Harry; he felt it taking root in the center of his own magical power. It was strange and difficult to believe that his friends were doing this for him. He wondered if he could possibly be worth it.

Lupin was next. His hand touched Harry’s arm, gently. “I swear to die for you, Harry,” he said calmly, his face unreadable. He might have been struck again by Harry’s resemblance to James at that moment. “I love you.” Lupin’s expression changed slightly, and Harry could see tears in the grey eyes of his teacher as he raised his wand and put the tip of it to Harry’s scar, which was burning slightly now, from the magic that was being channeled through it. “In nomine *Expecto Sacrificum*.” Lupin lowered his wand and stepped quietly away, swiping beneath his eyes.

Sirius took one long step forward and lay his hand fully on the crown of Harry’s head, pushing back his hair. His face was raw with emotion. “I swear to die for you, Harry. I love you.” His godfather’s eyes were not deadened now; they pierced into Harry with all the life he could summon and every word he spoke was impassioned. What had happened before would never happen again. He put his wand to Harry’s scar and held it there. Harry felt as though his skin was searing now, but he didn’t dare move. This was too important. “In nomine *Expecto Sacrificum*,” Sirius incanted. And then, his eyes still blazing, he stepped back.

Ginny was the final contributor. She provided a necessary element, which was the only reason that Harry had allowed Hermione to ask for her help. Ginny had said yes instantaneously, but Harry looked at her now and wondered why he was letting her agree. Suddenly, he wanted to say no—to shout it—to stop her from doing the magic. He wanted to stop all of them. They couldn’t risk their lives for his and they shouldn’t have to. His protection wasn’t worth this sacrifice, was it? He was only one person and they were five; he was only a wizard who happened to be good at Quidditch and have a mortal enemy; yes, he might be the Boy Who Lived, but that didn’t mean anything if his friends couldn’t live as well. They were his family now. His first family had already done this for him, and they were gone.

Panicking, Harry held up a palm to arrest her, and opened his mouth to protest. But Ginny caught his fingers with her wand hand and shook her head quickly, giving him a look so fiercely intense that he closed his mouth again without a word. He wasn’t to speak. He wasn’t to interrupt this. They had all been through these arguments together, and in the end, Harry had agreed to allow the building of this spell. There was no other way.

Satisfied that he was going to stay quiet, Ginny cupped his cheek with her free hand and looked up into his face. “I swear to die for you, Harry.” Her voice was low, but every word was surely pronounced. “I love you.” The tone of her whisper made him shiver. Everyone in the circle caught a breath, but Ginny didn’t take her eyes away from Harry’s. She let go of his hand and, still holding his face, she raised her wand to touch his scar. “In nomine *Expecto Sacrificum*.” Harry flinched slightly at the touch. The magic coming in through the curse scar on his forehead was extremely strong, and by now very painful. There was a throbbing beneath Ginny’s wand, and it was all he

could do to stand still, but he did. He had to.

Without a sound, Ginny removed her wand from the spot and stepped back into the circle, leaving Harry in the center. The newly completed spell coursed through him from his forehead into his feet. Every inch of him was filled with it and the magic went deeper than his bones. Clearly, they had meant what they had said to him. And if he faced Voldemort with this... then perhaps...

Harry flexed his fingers on his wand and imagined the words in his head. *"Expecto Sacrificum!"* To his great surprise, a bolt of something white-hot shot through his hand and sparks flew from his wand. He jumped, and stared at it. He hadn't even said anything.

The bluebell flame lit all five faces in the ring and Harry looked up at them in wonder. He wanted to thank them, but his voice failed. He knew it wasn't just for him that they were doing this—it was for the world, for everyone who would suffer as long as Voldemort stayed in power. Yet, it was being done *through* him, and it could only happen through him because his friends were willing to give him so much.

Silently, Harry held open his hands. "I..." he began quietly, "I can't..."

But it didn't matter. A moment later, he was surrounded on all sides as everyone in the room fused together in a tight and protective embrace. Someone kicked the bluebell flame, which flickered out and left them all in darkness, but no one moved to light it. Either this spell was going to work, or this was going to be the last time they all stood together, and all of them knew it.

Harry shut his eyes and leaned his head heavily on the shoulder nearest to him, taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly.

This had better work...

* * * * *

"Harry?"

He had been sitting on the entrance steps to Hogwarts, looking out at the lake. It was beautiful in summer. Hogwarts was half falling apart behind him, but the lake was shining, quite oblivious, under the bright June sun.

"Come on, Harry, we're all ready to go if you are."

It still felt like a dream. Only a week ago, on graduation day, there had been a war raging here. Only a week ago, there had been a Voldemort who had wanted to destroy him. And now it was still.

"Hey, what's taking you so-blimey, is he still sitting out here? Harry, get up, I'm hungry, I want to get over there."

But it wasn't that cold, terrible stillness—the kind they'd all been whispering in for the past few years. Not the tense hush of frightened waiting, not the awful, quiet magnitude of another death. Just peace.

"Shh, let him be. Where's Ginny?"

"Saying goodbye to her room."

"Oh." There was a small sniffle. "My trunk's by the fire, is yours?"

"I'll get it in a minute."

"I thought you said you were ready! Well, go get it now, I'll get Harry to come in."

A little breeze blew. There was a sound of trees rustling at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, and the sound of some odd creature singing there—not quite a bird, not quite a mammal. Hagrid would have known what it was. Harry bowed his head. At least it was over, he told himself again.

"Harry, I'm going in. Come in when you're ready, we're going by Floo powder from the common room fireplace. Professor McGonagall said that it would work now." She paused. "I'll tell Ron to bring your trunk down, shall I?"

Harry nodded numbly and stared out over the lawn, tears swimming up in his eyes. He didn't turn around to show them, but for once, he didn't try to fight them back, either. He heard footsteps behind him, and the oak entrance door shutting softly. He was alone for a moment. Harry pushed up his glasses and blinked his eyes hard in order to focus on the letter that dangled in his hand. It was a good letter. It was too good to be true, and the shock of it hadn't quite worn off.

Dear Harry,

Of course you'll bring Ron, and Hermione and Ginny. We hoped that you would, and there's more than enough space for all of you, though two will have to share each room. Remus and I are looking forward to your arrival. Get here as quickly as you can.

You know that I have had my doubts as to whether I would ever be free to do my godfatherly duties by you. But Harry, now that I am, it's going to be the way it should have been all along. I promise you that.

*Can't wait to see you,
–Sirius*

Harry looked at the letter for a long time. He was going to spend a summer—an entire summer—with his friends. And there wasn't any danger in it. No Dark threats hanging over his head, no Draco Malfoy next fall, no Death Eaters, no Dursleys.

There was a fierce ache in Harry—part joy, part emptiness. After everything that had happened, life continued. It was still summer. The lake was blinding. Hogwarts was out of session. He had graduated its halls.

“Harry?”

He turned toward the gentle voice, and a tall, slim figure with red hair dropped down beside him on the step. “You ready, then?”

“Do I have to be?”

Ginny rested her chin on her knees and sighed at the question. Harry noticed that her eyes were already red-rimmed.

“No—of course you don't have to be,” she replied quietly. “I'm not.”

“But we have to go anyway.”

“Yes.”

They paused and Harry looked past Ginny, straining his head left down toward the Quidditch pitch. “Everything ends,” he muttered, not sure why he felt so suddenly bitter.

“No. Some things don't.”

He looked at her quickly—their eyes caught for a moment, and then both of them looked down.

“Ron said you were saying goodbye to your room.”

“I was. So he came up and told me to quit talking to myself, and then he went up to the boys' dorm and magicked your trunk down for you.”

Harry had to smile. That was Ron.

“So everyone's waiting on me, then.”

“Well, Hermione said not to rush you. But it's... it's time, Harry. Sirius will wonder what happened to us.”

“I wish I could take Fawkes with us.”

“Soon. He'll be fine, and you'll have Hedwig.”

“Yes. I guess we'd better do this.”

“Yes.”

Together, they got to their feet, brushing off their habitual black school robes and surveying the grounds once more. Harry drew a long, deep breath, turned, and was walking behind Ginny into the castle when he chanced to look up. His eyes fell on the tower that had once been Dumbledore's. The Headmaster's empty window glared brilliantly in the sun.

Harry lifted his hand in an instinctive salute. The window seemed to flash.

And then he followed Ginny inside to the Great Hall, where Ron and Hermione were waiting for them. This was going to be the first real summer of his life.

— CHAPTER ONE —

Through the Fireplace

Sirius Black flipped the last egg onto the platter filled with beans and sausage and, with a tight flick of his wand, sent the platter zooming to the table. It landed before the half-asleep eyes of Remus Lupin, where it spun dizzily, revolving at least half a dozen times before coming to a impressive halt.

“Ta *da*. Eat up, Moony! I’ll get the paper—”

Remus opened his mouth to answer, but Sirius had already cleared the kitchen in a bound, and burst outside into the warm June air.

“You can Summon the paper, you know,” Remus croaked after him, pushing the eggs gingerly toward the center of the table, where he wouldn’t have to smell them. He wasn’t awake enough for this exchange.

“I like going outside for it.”

Sirius was already back. Truly, Remus thought, the man was hyperactive—he tossed the paper into the air and cast a quick spell on it, causing it to flap its pages, birdlike, toward the table. It landed next to the breakfast platter and crowed loudly once, before settling. Remus groaned.

“Please,” he muttered, “Enough with the early morning fireworks.” But he didn’t really mean it. He knew why Sirius was excited. And when he was awake enough, he knew that he’d join in.

Sirius wasn’t a bit offended—he laughed and stuffed an entire sausage into his wide grin.

“I’m a free man, Moony,” he said radiantly, once he’d swallowed. Remus couldn’t help cracking a grin, weary as he felt. Sirius’s freedom meant almost as much to him as it did to Sirius. “A free man with a godson. And it’s summer. And the bloody war is over—” Sirius screwed his face into a deliberately tortured grimace and began to jerk his head around wildly. “And ‘Oh my, ain’t it good to be free—in a world where your Curses can take my liberty-y-y’...”

Remus looked on, half-amused, half-worried. “You’re singing.”

“I am indeed. ‘Oh, oh, oh’...” still swinging his head and muttering lyrics, Sirius raised his wand to make coffee.

“What *is* that? It’s awful. It’s not music.”

“Get with it, you old man, that’s the Weird Sisters. They’re in.” Sirius grinned over his shoulder. “Better brush up, now we’ve got teenagers coming.” He jumped up to sit on the countertop while the coffee brewed itself, and he grinned through the kitchen door toward Remus, who remained at the table, bemused.

“Yes. You should get along with them nicely.”

“You’re just jealous because you’re tone deaf. Go on, admit it.”

“Ah.” Remus nodded. “Well, musical ability aside, Padfoot, you’re totally unprepared for Harry to get here. I realize it’s not as if we’ve had time to think about it this week, but there are things that still need to get—”

“Not prepared! I’ve been ready and willing to live with Harry since he was a year old, and I’ve had to wait this long for it.” Sirius’s smile faded slightly and his eyes began to lose their glow. “I’d say that’s enough time to get prepared.”

Remus shook his head apologetically and held up a hand—this wasn’t the moment to think back. Forge ahead, he reminded himself. That’s what they’d sworn to try. Harry was coming, and he deserved to move on from the things that had happened, which would be hard going with a volatile Sirius getting angry on the very first day. He would have to keep calm, and redirect the focus of the conversation.

“That wasn’t what I meant, Padfoot. I meant in the house. Beds, groceries—”

“We’ve got beds, what are you talking about?”

“Sheets, pillows—it’s a good thing my parents took such good care of everything. We’ve got dishes

enough, and silverware, and they had a cat so the old litter box is still around here somewhere for Crookshanks—but we haven't got enough towels in this place for six people, so—

"Fuss, fuss, fuss." Sirius, looking happy again, poured a cup of coffee and strode out into the small dining area to sit across from Remus at the table. "Do you think they're going to care about all that? Towels and sheets? They're teenagers."

Remus raised an eyebrow at Sirius, who continually amazed him. How the same man could have aged so much and so little at the same time, was beyond him. "This is what I'm telling you. Those girls are going to care about clean towels. The animals have to be accounted for—it's going to be a menagerie in here with the owls and the cat. And if you haven't any food in the house, you'll have two very restless seventeen-year-old boys on your hands in—" Remus checked his watch. "Four hours."

"Plenty of time!" Sirius leaned back and stretched out his legs. "And Ron's eighteen, I believe. Eighteen!" He stopped and shook his head, pale blue eyes glinting with a memory. "Remember eighteen?"

Remus smiled. Sirius grinned. They remembered eighteen, quite, quite well. And this was a different kind of thinking back. This was allowable.

"We were living in that three bedroom thing—"

"Ho—remember the fireplace?"

"How could I forget it."

"Cramped old spot, I think I still have bruises."

"James loved it—well, but that was due to Lily's painting all around it."

"Please. That was all flattery—he just wanted to get in her room and he thought she'd fall for that line."

"Sirius!"

"Oh come on, you know it. But Lily was no fool—she wouldn't let James inside her room *ever*."

"Well. Yes. Drove him rather wild."

"It certainly did." Sirius sighed. "I can't believe Harry's really coming here."

Remus nodded. "I can't believe how much seeing his face is like..."

"Having Prongs. I know."

"You think you know, but just wait. You've known Harry in war, in crisis— but that year I had him in class, I swear to you, sometimes I had to remind myself who he was. It's uncanny."

"God, I hope so."

They were quiet a moment. Sirius went to the kitchen, poured himself a second cup of coffee and returned. When he had settled himself again, he frowned and pointed to the window.

"Who's the man, there?"

Remus followed Sirius's finger and peered out the front window of the cottage, across the small road, where a large, impressive gray house stood far back on a manicured lawn, making all the cottages on the street around it look terribly shabby, by comparison. On its wide upper balcony a man sat, reading the newspaper.

"Martin Lewis," Remus replied.

"Know him?"

"Well, his family's always been there, but we missed him in school by a few years—he's got about a decade on you and me."

"Ah." Sirius looked gravely at his coffee. Remus knew that there had to be something to it.

"Why are you asking?"

Sirius shook his head. "Nothing. I should have expected it."

"What?" Remus was not about to give this up, not when whatever it was had brought Sirius down so quickly.

Sirius sighed and bent more deeply over the coffee cup in his hands. "It's honestly nothing, Moony. It's just that I shouted hello to him out there, when I grabbed the paper." His eyes clouded.

"And?"

"He ran inside."

Remus reached a hand across the table instinctively, but Sirius waved it off.

"No, I should have expected it." He laughed. "Although you'd think since I'd been pardoned by the Ministry, people wouldn't be quite so terrified—"

"Sirius..."

"I mean, if I were a murdering traitor, wouldn't I have had his head by now?" Sirius looked out of the window bitterly. "I've been pardoned for nine months. I've lived here all that time."

"He's run away from you before this, hasn't he?" Sirius didn't answer him, but Remus knew that it had happened and his heart ached. "You didn't tell me."

"Well, there hasn't been a lot of time for whining, has there? Anyway, what's the point?"

"I could have told you not to mind him, Sirius. He does the same thing to me."

Sirius looked up at Remus in surprise. "You mean he knows about you?"

Remus smiled wryly. "Somehow, yes he does. I'm not quite certain how, but people find out about these things, and whether you're actually dangerous or not doesn't seem to matter. Most people live in fear regardless of the truth."

Sirius laughed darkly. "We just won a war, and people are still behaving exactly the way they did before. I can't believe it. I'm telling you, Moony, it makes me want to..." He cut himself off, drank a deep, scalding gulp of coffee, and exhaled. His voice was definitely bitter now; it had the Azkaban edge, and Remus flinched to hear it. He had known that Sirius's new, blinding good mood would come and go. After all, there had been very little to be happy about for a long time. Even if there was joy coming to them now, history couldn't be helped. All they could do was try to move through it, try to salvage what was left.

"Burned my bloody tongue," Sirius muttered, glaring into his cup.

Remus knew his cue. This was the opportunity to turn the conversation. "You're going to have to take it easy with the swearing," he said mildly. "You've got to set an example."

Like a shot, Sirius's head was up again, and he pulled a face. "What, in front of the teenagers? As if Harry and Ron have never heard the word bloody!"

"That's hardly your worst offender."

Sirius grinned broadly. "True."

"In any case, Ron and Harry aren't coming alone."

"Oh, what? I'm to watch my mouth in front of little Ginny?"

Remus laughed. "No, she's probably worse than you are. I had to ask her to calm down once in a Defense Against the Dark Arts class of mine. She couldn't figure out how to get a dervish to quit whirling, and she let out quite a 'damn'."

"In class?" Sirius looked delighted.

"Her second year."

"I like her." He raised an eyebrow. "So it's Hermione we're worried about then. All right, I'll hold my tongue if I can, although from what we've heard out of Ron's mouth, the poor girl's already got her work cut out for her."

"Yes. Well." Remus suppressed a smile, as something occurred to him. "Oh yes, I meant to ask you—what did you end up telling them all about the rooming arrangements?"

Sirius's smile went unrepressed. He grinned wickedly. "I told them that two would have to share each room."

"Yes, but did you make it clear *which* two, to each room?"

"Thought I'd let them battle that one out for themselves. I'm sure they're old enough to figure it out."

"You don't mean you'd consider..."

"I do."

"Absolutely not! We can't. The Weasleys would kill us, Padfoot."

"Ah, Moony. And I thought you remembered eighteen." Sirius kicked his feet up onto the table and shut his eyes, apparently remembering.

Remus gave him a disapproving stare to which he was oblivious, reached out and plucked the newspaper from the table, settling back to take in the news of the wizarding world.

"HELLO! HELLO? ARE EITHER OF YOU THERE? SIRIUS? REMUS?"

The voice came from the living room—loud, urgent and extremely startling. At the first sound of it, both Sirius and Remus had dropped to the floor on instinct and gone for their wands. Remus felt his breath coming in gasps and his heart racing. Beside him, he could hear Sirius gasping, too.

It took them a moment to remember that the Death Eaters had been defeated. They looked at each other under the table and shook their heads, exhaling hard.

Shell shock, Remus reflected, was not a pleasant state of being. Wondering how long he'd react like that to everyday visitors, he got to his feet, dusted his robes, and walked down the hall into the room where the largest fireplace stood. In it, among the flames, a familiar head was shouting mightily.

"IF EITHER OF YOU ARE AT HOME, I NEED TO SPEAK TO YOU. IT'S ARTHUR—Oh! Remus. You're at home."

Arthur Weasley smiled from the fire, but it didn't do anything to conceal the fatigue in his eyes. He'd aged ten years in the past three, and it showed in every line of his face. The red hair he had left was tinged with gray.

"Hello, Arthur. You startled us a little, I'm afraid."

Arthur nodded. He understood. "I wouldn't have hollered quite like that, but it's urgent. Have you seen the paper?"

"I was just about to read it. No, why, what's happened?"

"Is Sirius there? I'd rather just say it all once."

"I'm here." Sirius had apparently recovered himself. He entered the room and crouched by the fire. "What is it, Arthur?"

"You're not going to like this one, Sirius. It's the Dementors." Arthur looked grimly apologetic. No one liked to bring up Dementors to Sirius; it brought that hardened look into his eyes. Remus watched Sirius's face set like stone into jagged lines as he braced himself for the conversation.

"It's fine," Sirius said evenly, though Remus knew it wasn't. "What's happening with the Dementors?"

Arthur sighed and his head shook slowly side to side in the fire. "We're having one hell of a time keeping them at Azkaban. I thought we'd done the hardest bit already this week, what with throwing all the Death Eaters back in prison, but it's not going to do much good if we don't have guards, is it?"

"Why? Won't the Dementors guard the island?" Remus asked at once, feeling his heart sink. Since the battle that had taken place at Hogwarts a week ago, it had been all that the Order could do to round up Voldemort's remaining supporters and make sure that they weren't going to cause further damage. Everyone remembered what had happened to the Longbottoms last time. Just when it had seemed they were safe, they'd been brutally attacked.

"The Dementors won't sit still," Arthur informed them, and though his voice was steady, his eyes were anxious. "They're trying to get *off* the island. The free rein they had in the Dark army has gone to their heads, I think. They were encouraged to perform the Kiss at random for so long, that now..."

"Don't tell me." Sirius's face was flat white.

"No—they haven't done any damage to anyone innocent. Not yet. But there's a strong worry. If they don't want to stay on the island, there's nothing much to hold them off the streets. I don't know how we can hope to reestablish Azkaban if the Dementors won't take to it anymore."

Remus stepped up behind Sirius's crouched form and put a light hand on his shoulder. "Where are the Death Eaters now, then?"

Arthur gritted his teeth. "Mad-Eye's on that. They're not going anywhere for a time. They're sitting in Azkaban. But he can only do so much, and there aren't enough Aurors anymore to make it easy on him—" He stopped and shook his head again.

"How are you, Arthur?" asked Remus, gently.

The head in the fireplace gave an odd laugh. "As well as I can be, under the circumstances. I've got help. Fletcher's taking the M.L.E.S, Mad-Eye's got the Aurors, Diggory's here and the Patils... and some of the others have come back..." He gave a heaving sigh. "But I've got two problems. First, I don't want the Dementors going near anyone—I don't even trust them with the prisoners. Not everybody in Azkaban deserves to be in there and I don't want them all getting Kissed when we haven't got a clue who's really guilty. They're all pulling that old line on us again."

"Pretending to have been Curse-controlled." Sirius stood, and paced across the room quickly. When he turned back, his eyes were livid. "Arthur, some of them are probably telling the truth."

"I know it. But what can I do? I've got no way to hold prisoners in Azkaban without the Dementors, and I can't just let Death Eaters go free. I haven't got enough manpower to investigate all their claims, let alone give them proper trials. The Ministry's hardly up to anything of that magnitude yet; half the old officials are dead or won't come back—"

"It's a wreck. Yes, I know. But you can't leave people in Azkaban, you *can't* Arthur—not unless you know for absolute certain what they've done. We've got to *kill* the Dementors—it's time they were destroyed."

"Sirius." Remus's voice was very quiet. "Arthur, what do you want us to do?"

"Anything you can." His face was drawn. "I know you're tired. You deserve a rest more than anyone, the both of you. I wouldn't ask if I didn't need the help."

Sirius was rocking back and forth on his feet, his hands in his hair. "You know you've got our help. But I'm going to have to think. I'm just going to have to think—because those prisoners—if any of them are telling the truth, Arthur, even one of them—"

"Sirius."

"Believe me, Sirius, I want them all sorted out. But we had to get them *in*, first. Mad-Eye and Fletcher've rounded up everyone we have reason to believe is guilty. I'd prefer to relocate them to another prison, but where? And even if we could relocate them, how would we keep them contained? We're all drawing a blank. So before anything else, I've got to do is keep those Dementors back away from the mainland—Remus, you don't know of anything I can do to hold them at Azkaban?"

"Just the Patronus."

"That's all I've got, too." He sighed. "I'll tell you, it's tearing the life out of Mad-Eye and the others, performing that spell twenty-five times a day."

"I believe it. It's exhausting." Remus paused, knowing what the answer to his next question would be. "Do you want me up there?"

"No." Arthur finally smiled, and this time it reached his eyes, as he looked back at Remus. "You absolutely cannot come up here. I want you both to stay right where you are. Give my children a hug for me, when they get there, would you?"

Remus nodded, smiling back at him. "I will if they let me."

"Harry and Hermione are included in that." Arthur grinned and raised his eyebrows ruefully. "You're both insane, you know. They'll run your house down. Can't believe you're taking on four teenagers for a summer."

Sirius laughed—sharply, but a laugh, all the same—and seemed to come out of his preoccupation for a moment. "You're one to talk! You took on seven of them for a lifetime."

Arthur flinched, Remus flinched, and Sirius immediately went pale. He opened his mouth to speak, as if there was anything to say.

But it was only a moment before Arthur recovered. "I did, at that," he murmured, to no one in particular. And then he blinked and continued, the urgency coming back into his face as he muttered on about Azkaban. "We need to think in new ways. Replace the Dementors. Penelope's been working on that Imprisonment Charm for a long time, now—that might be the ticket, if we could harness something like that."

"How near is the spell to being ready?" Remus asked at once.

"Nowhere near. If there were only anything else..." Arthur looked as if he were nearing the end of his rope. "Just think on what I've said, would you both? And get back to me if you come up with anything you think might work. Even if it's a long shot, I want to hear about it."

Sirius was still unable to speak, so Remus nodded briefly. "We'll get right on it."

"Thank you." Arthur's head turned slightly and he seemed to be looking at something. "Bloody hell," he muttered momentarily, "Not again. Damned reporters—just here yesterday, wanted a statement about what we plan to do about Azkaban. What do they think has changed in twenty-four hours? I'm tempted to tell them we're shutting it down and turning it into a tourist attraction for Muggles."

Remus grinned. "Do you think the Muggles would go for that?"

"Maybe not, but the *Prophet* would. I'm telling you, it's a mad world. The Ministry falls apart, Gringotts is down, Hogwarts has to shut—but not the *Daily Prophet*. No, the media just keeps on running." He chortled slightly. "I guess there's hope somewhere in that, eh? Well." He turned serious again. "Get back to me when you can, all right?"

"Of course we will. Goodbye, Arthur—hello to Molly for us."

With a smile, a nod, and a 'pop', Arthur Weasley disappeared.

Sirius wasted no time. He turned on the wall and kicked it, so fiercely that it must have injured his foot, though he didn't seem to notice it. He was in a rage.

"Stupid. Careless. How could I have brought up his children?"

"You didn't mean—"

"Hardly matters what I meant. There's Arthur, asking for our help, his hands full trying to put that Ministry back together—and I go on callously bringing that up."

"You were hardly callous."

But Sirius wasn't listening. "I was busy thinking about Azkaban. One word about Dementors and it's all over for me—nice and selfish—didn't even think about what he's still going through—he lost a son—"

"Sirius. Stop it. Now."

Sirius did stop. He dropped into a chair and put his face in his hands. "Why?" he asked through his fingers. "Why? Why does it feel like there's still a war on? What am I supposed to tell Harry about everything that's happened? I'm still losing it—James shouldn't have left him to me—how can I help him get through all of this when I'm..."

Remus was crouched in front of him in an instant; he took Sirius's hands down from his face and kept them in his own. "What? When you're what? Sirius, you're alive. And you *want* him here. That's what counts to Harry, I promise you—that's all he needs. You don't have to worry about explaining everything. He was there for it, he was part of it—he knows."

He waited. And momentarily, Sirius looked up at him. It was painful to look in his eyes, but Remus kept steady contact.

"I just want to know him, Remus."

"I know."

"I don't want either of us to lose any more time."

"I know."

Sirius also obviously didn't want to cry. His face was a struggle of emotion. Abruptly, he pulled his hands away, shot out of the chair and strode into the hallway with sudden, manic energy.

"Where are you going?" Remus called after him.

"To get groceries."

The door slammed, shaking the cottage walls slightly. Remus sighed, got to his feet, and went upstairs to see that the bedrooms were ready. Things were so much better than they had been, he told himself, shaking pillows into their pillowcases. And they would only continue to improve. But that didn't mean that this summer was going to be easy. Not at all.

* * * * *

"Where in hell are they?"

"Calm down."

"They said noon. It's twelve-oh-two. Do you think something's happened to them?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, how am I supposed to know that?" Sirius was irate, excited, practically hitting the walls. "Twelve-oh-three."

"You tell time extremely well, have I ever told you that?"

"Oh, shut it, Moony."

"No, actually this gives me a moment to discuss something with you—I suppose it could wait another two weeks, but—"

"No, tell me now."

Remus smiled. It was so easy to distract Sirius, when he was like this. "I just wanted to make sure we were clear on what I'll be doing every month," he said calmly. "I'll Apparate to Badenoch every morning leading up to the full moon, for the Wolfsbane. I'll stay the night at the apothecary's habitat there for the actual transformation, and I'll be back the following morning."

Sirius had stopped pacing and his face had fallen. "I wish you didn't have to do that. If I felt comfortable making that potion..."

"Then you'd do it. I know." They had been over and over this. It was an incredibly complex recipe that neither of them felt perfectly at ease with. So Remus simply preferred to go elsewhere for a proper Wolfsbane Potion if he could, and do his transforming quietly, without any risk of violence to himself, or others. But Sirius still felt guilty that he wasn't more an expert at the process.

Remus, however, ignored the guilt completely. "I just don't want the transformation to be an issue. Not with us, and not with our houseguests." He smiled slightly. "So if they ask, we'll just tell them that I'll be gone for twenty-four hours, once a month. It's quite simple. And if they don't ask, then Sirius, I'd just rather we didn't bring it up."

Sirius looked at him intently for a moment, and then nodded. "Fair enough." And then, as if they hadn't even had the conversation, he checked his watch, glanced at the flue and yelled, "Twelve-oh-bloody-six! Do they not know how to use Floo powder?! Should I go on over to Hogwarts and see if—"

He got no further. There was a flash of green flame, a blast of air and the thud of a large trunk.

"Ow, Crookshanks!" Hermione Granger stood in the large fireplace, clasping a large, ginger cat close to her body with both arms. Crookshanks had obviously taken very badly to traveling by Floo powder—Hermione was struggling to pull her robes free from the cat's sharp claws. When Crookshanks finally leapt from her arms, she looked up, beamed, and walked straight toward Remus and Sirius, who were standing in the center of the room, beaming back.

"I don't know whom to hug first," she laughed, looking from one to the other and clapping her hands together happily. She didn't have to choose. Sirius was so overexcited by that time that he grabbed her up and squeezed her tightly, making her gasp over his shoulder at Remus. He grinned at her.

"Hello, Hermione."

"Hermione, it's wonderful to see you," Sirius bellowed, letting her loose. "What on earth took you so long?"

Hermione looked immediately chastised as she moved to embrace Remus. "Long?" she inquired anxiously. "Are we very late? Oh, I'm sorry to worry you, I *told* Harry... but we didn't want him to feel hurried."

Sirius stepped back and frowned. "No, no, good, of course not. So tell me, how *is* Harry? How have you all been?"

Remus shook his head. "Sirius, he's going to be here any second-Hermione, could you step aside for a moment, please?" He raised his wand. "We'll want to get your trunk out of the fireplace before--"

It was too late. There was another swirl of green flame, a great crash and a deep voice yelling, "BLIMEY!"

Ron Weasley was wedged behind Hermione's trunk-his own had fallen sideways on top of hers, blocking him from view. All that was visible was a shock of red hair and a long arm, groping out from the side, holding an owl cage. Within it, Pigwidgeon was swinging from side to side and hooting happily.

Quickly, Remus magicked both trunks out of the way, revealing Ron, cramped back against the bricks.

"Hermione," he gasped, dropping Pig's cage to the floor unceremoniously and stepping forward, "could you take a little longer about your trunk next time, please? I wouldn't want to rush you, or anything. Hey, Sirius. Hey, Professor Lupin."

"Remus, Ron."

"I know, I know, but I can't help it. It still sounds funny to me." He shook Sirius's hand firmly, and then Remus's, grinning widely at them both. "Damn good to be here," he sighed, looking around the cozy living room with an air of deep satisfaction.

"Ron!"

He raised an eyebrow at Hermione. "What? You don't like it here?" She glared at him, but not for long, as he hobbled gingerly to a chair and began to rub one of his ankles, rotating it gently and grimacing.

"Oh, did you hurt yourself on the trunk?"

"Just a bit."

"Well don't do it that way-here, let me have a look at it."

Hermione dropped to her knees and busied herself for a moment, turning Ron's foot from side to side in her hands, while Ron stared at the top of her head.

Remus looked at Sirius. They grinned.

"So," Sirius began, his tone highly mischievous, "whatever have you two done this week, while the rest of us were slaving away? Having fun were you?"

Remus cleared his throat and gave Sirius a subtle, sideways look. It wouldn't do to tease them too obviously in adult company.

But Remus was forgetting that they were nearly adults themselves. They certainly didn't seem terribly uncomfortable. Hermione gave Ron's ankle a gentle little pat. "I think you'll be fine," she muttered, before standing quickly and smoothing her robes. "Oh, we worked too," she answered Sirius airily. "We helped Professor McGonagall to clear things out for the rebuilding. And we talked a lot about what's happened. About what we're going to do now that..." she trailed off and sighed. "Honestly, this has been the oddest week of my life, and I don't..."

"Mine too," Ron agreed, fixing his shoe on his foot once more. "I mean, what are you supposed to do with yourself after..."

They looked at each other, each having run out of words, and shrugged a little. Remus didn't blame them. They'd spent the last few years of what should have been their adolescence fighting in a war. To live a normal life would take some getting used to.

But Sirius wasn't having any of it. "Oh, I'll *tell* you what you're going to do," he said hotly, pacing through the room to them and banging his fist in his hand for emphasis. "You're all going to have a damned good summer, for once--"

"Sirius!" Hermione looked scandalized.

"Ah," he said, with a sheepish glance at Remus. "Sorry."

Ron, however, laughed wickedly. "Finally, I've got help," he said, standing up and ruffling Hermione's hair. "This *is* going to be a great summer. We're going to drive you mad."

Hermione pursed her lips and tried to look angry. She failed.

"I wonder what's keeping Ginny?" she mused after a moment. And then, "I hope Harry's all right."

The room fell into a serious silence as each of them contemplated that statement. It was very unlikely that Harry was all right. He was alive, to be certain. But as for being all right... well, Remus reflected again, that was going to take a lot of time.

There was a small flicker, a whirl of green, and Ginny Weasley was in the fireplace.

"Oh good!" cried Hermione. "Come out of there, we need get your trunk cleared before Harry—"

But Ginny wasn't moving and she looked a little shaken. She pushed her long hair out of her eyes and shook her head.

"What is it, Ginny?" Remus said, crossing the room quickly. "Are you all right?"

"It's not me, I'm fine," she said quickly. "And hello, by the way." She smiled at Remus, and waved to Sirius behind him.

Sirius was at the fireplace in one long stride. "Is something wrong with Harry?" he demanded.

"No—here, let me out and I'll tell you, we should move my trunk. He might come."

"He *might* come?"

"Sirius," said Remus gently, "could you move, please, and let Ginny out of the fireplace?"

Sirius reluctantly stepped back and Ginny moved into the room. Remus moved her trunk through the air toward Ron's and Hermione's.

"I don't mean to scare you or anything, Sirius," Ginny said, finding a chair and dropping into it, as if exhausted. Remus noticed that her eyes were slightly bloodshot. "There's nothing actually *wrong* with Harry—well, there's nothing wrong with him physically—well." She stopped, her face faintly pink. "You know what I'm trying to say."

"Yes," said Remus kindly. "He's not in any danger."

Ginny looked up at him gratefully. "Right. But he doesn't want to get in the fireplace."

They all looked at each other, and then back at Ginny.

"What?" said Ron, getting up. "Why won't he get in the fireplace?"

Ginny sighed and looked at Ron as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "He doesn't want to leave Hogwarts," she said patiently. "He just doesn't want to let it go—it's not that he doesn't want to be *here*," she said quickly, turning to Sirius and smiling. "He can't wait to see you. He's been carrying that letter you sent him all around with him for a week."

Sirius looked touched.

"It's just that," Ginny continued, looking to Hermione now for help, "he's... he just..."

"He doesn't want it all to be over," Hermione said softly. "Not school—" she paused. "And, in a way, not the war."

Ron turned on Hermione right away, his eyes flashing. "Doesn't want the war to be *over*? Of course he does! It was terrible! We've wanted all that over with for—well—forever! Ever since we've known him! And now it's done, and we've got a chance to have a life and he doesn't want to get in the bloody fireplace? Well, that's it. I'm going back there," he said determinedly, "and making him."

Ron moved to the fireplace, and Remus moved to stop him but Ginny was quicker. She cut him off in a flash. "No, don't," she pleaded. "Can't we let him have a minute? And then, if he doesn't come in half an hour or so, somebody can go and get him?"

"I will." Sirius had a hand on Ron's shoulder. For the first time at all that day, Sirius looked perfectly calm and rational, and Remus marveled at him. "Let him have a little while, Ron. This isn't going to happen all at once. The letting go—well, it happens by degrees." Sirius sighed. "Trust me."

Clearly, Ron did trust him. He backed away from the fireplace and sat down again heavily. Hermione put a hand on his shoulder. Ginny stared into the fireplace. "He'll come," she said quietly.

The living room was silent, except for the sound of Pigwidgeon, hooting every so often as Crookshanks prowled the perimeter of his cage.

"Hermione," Ron muttered warily, pointing to the scene.

"They're just *playing*," she replied, in a tone that left no room for argument. Ron raised his eyebrows doubtfully, but said nothing.

Sirius crouched down next to the fireplace and began to distract Crookshanks. Remus watched them, smiling inwardly—he had forgotten that Padfoot and Crookshanks had once been quite good friends.

"Wonderful old beast," Sirius muttered, smiling as he stroked Crookshanks from head to tail. And then it was silent again, except for Crookshanks's purring. When another quarter of an hour

had passed, Sirius stood up and looked at Remus tensely.

"Do you think I should go and check on him?"

"It might be a good idea."

"Then I'm off. You all eat lunch and get settled—don't bother waiting for me."

They all nodded, and Sirius pinched a bit of Floo powder from the box on the mantle. He was just about to throw it when a rush of air and light arrested him, and he dropped the powder into the carpet, forgotten.

Harry Potter stood in the fireplace, his glasses askew and his black hair sticking up in every direction.

"Hi, Sirius," he said smilingly, though his eyes were solemn. He stepped out of the fireplace and stood before his godfather, setting down Hedwig's cage gently and putting his hand out. "Sorry to make you wait like that."

But Sirius didn't care. He grasped Harry's hand and pulled him without warning into a tight embrace.

"Welcome home," he said, barely managing to get the words out. "Welcome home, Harry."

Over Sirius's shoulder, all of them could see Harry's face. His eyes were shut and his face so tense that the muscles in his jaw were clenched. But he reached around Sirius and hugged him firmly back.

Remus couldn't help the tears that were rising. It was so like seeing James. He saw that Hermione was looking rather misty as well, and that Ron, though smiling, was somewhat suspiciously red-eyed. Ginny wasn't crying, but her eyes were fixed on Harry's face.

"Thanks," Harry muttered after a long moment. He opened his eyes and pulled away. Sirius put hands on his shoulders and looked at him.

"God, you're tall."

"You just saw me a week ago."

"I didn't have a chance to notice."

Harry nodded, and so did Remus, watching him. There were plenty of things that had gone unnoticed in the past few years, and there was time to make up for. He turned and magicked his own trunk out of the fireplace, and sent it toward the others. "Hi, Remus," he said, stepping past Sirius to shake his old professor's hand.

Remus hoped his tears were not still showing. He was fairly certain that Harry had had enough of them. "Hello, Harry. Good to have you here." He gestured around the room to all of them. "Now that you're all together, shall I give you the tour?"

"Oh, yes, I'd love to see everyth—" but Hermione was not allowed to finish.

"What was that bit earlier, about the lunch?" Ron queried abruptly. "Couldn't we do that first, and then settle?"

Remus laughed. "Absolutely. And while we're eating—" he shot a look at Sirius and smiled—"perhaps you all can decide what the sleeping arrangements ought to be."

"Ah yes." Sirius grinned back at him. "Two to each room and the rest is up to you."

The mouths of all four teenagers dropped slightly open. Laughing, Remus and Sirius left them staring at each other, and walked away down the hall toward the kitchen to begin making lunch.

A/N: Thanks to all those who reviewed and never fear; the concerns you expressed will all be addressed as the story continues to unfold! And thanks also to our lovely List Aurors, B Bennett, Cap'n Kathy and Moey. We can't believe you've really set up a Yahoo list (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/AftertheEnd>) for this story and we hope we'll prove worthy of discussion.

— CHAPTER TWO —

In the Trench

February, four months before the end of the war.

“Bill?”

Bill Weasley stumbled through semi-darkness, his boots crunching on the snow. He was lost, exhausted, and had just begun to panic, when he heard his brother’s voice. “Bill! What are you doing here—no, never mind, just get your head down! Get in here, you idiot, quick!”

Bill ducked and jumped recklessly into the trench where Charlie, looking frantic, was waving for him.

“Charlie,” he gasped hoarsely, breath steaming in the freezing air. It had been a sickening two-day trip through Dark curse shields to get to his brother. He reached out with both his hands to clasp Charlie’s cloaked shoulders.

“You look like hell,” was Charlie’s cheerful greeting. “Damn, but it’s good to see you.” Charlie had a gift for being cheerful in the worst possible circumstances and Bill hated to ruin it—he hated to be the one who wiped the perpetually boyish smile from his brother’s face. But he’d come all this way and the news had to be broken. Charlie was the only one who didn’t know.

“Charlie, I came to tell you...” But the words wouldn’t come. Bill felt like he was underwater. His knees were buckling. His teeth were chattering. This was surreal.

“Bill?” Charlie’s smile had faded; he looked tense now. He opened his mouth as if to demand more information, but he seemed to change his mind abruptly. He shook his head. “No, let’s just get you inside,” he said calmly.

“Inside?” Bill asked blankly, looking around. It wasn’t yet pitch dark on the fields, and Bill had been looking out for a campsite as he’d approached. He hadn’t seen a thing. In fact, he felt horribly grateful to have found Charlie at all—he’d been searching for dragons as his landmark. The dragons were nowhere to be seen.

Charlie, however, pointed along the trench to where it turned in the ground. “We follow this into the side of a hill. Nice big cave, fits a ton of us.”

“Then what in hell are you doing out here?” Bill demanded roughly. “By yourself, in the middle of the night—don’t you know you’re putting yourself in danger—”

Charlie put an arm around Bill’s shoulders. “Calm down,” he said, beginning to steer Bill along the narrow trench. “I just came out to check on the dragons.” He grinned.

Bill glared at him. “Liar. How can you check on dragons when there aren’t any out there?”

Charlie’s grin just widened as they continued to walk. “Brilliant, isn’t it?” he whispered.

“What?”

“Diversion Enchantment. You can’t see the dragons, but Bill, you’re lucky to be alive. You walked right under their noses, getting to me. They’re all around us.”

“Great. Thanks for warning us all.”

“Oh, give it a rest,” Charlie said lightly. “The spell just got set up yesterday—we’re still testing to make sure it’s stable before the witch who did it can move on to another camp.” Charlie wagged his eyebrows. “And wait till you see the witch who put it up. Bit of a Diversion Enchantment herself, she is.”

Bill let out a short, hard laugh. He doubted Charlie would care much about knocking about with witches when he knew what had happened. Bill’s heart was cold and heavy,

and he wished with all his might that there were some way to put off the news. But they were at the mouth of the cave already.

"Welcome to wartime dragon keeping," Charlie said, proudly swinging an arm forward through the crevice. "You first."

Bill walked in, grateful to be inside again after two days in the cold. He looked up and around him, immediately impressed with the cave's size—it was twice the Great Hall in proportion. The mountain must have been completely hollow. Rock arched high overhead and firelight glistened on its wide, damp walls. Scattered in its corners and across its crags were sleeping bags and keeper-gear of all kinds; dragonhide gloves, Unburnable broomsticks and flame-repellant robes were tossed about in random piles.

The keepers themselves were gathered in smallish groups around several different fires. Most of them were men, young and strong, like Charlie.

"How are they, Charlie?" one of the nearest ones called from where he was eating supper. Beside him, a black-haired female keeper looked up from cleaning her equipment and fixed Charlie with a questioning look.

"Beautiful, Mick," Charlie called back to the young man, shooting the girl a reckless grin. "Can't see scale nor claw of 'em. Hidden completely, I think."

The young dragon keepers nodded, satisfied, and resumed their activities.

"Hungry, Bill?"

"What?" Bill asked vaguely, focusing on his brother. The haze of disbelief that still lingered in his brain made it difficult for him to process the situation. But when he met Charlie's eyes, he knew he could put off his purpose no longer, and he felt a rush of nausea so strong that it threatened to make him physically ill. "No," he managed. "Look, just get me to wherever it is you sleep. We've got to talk privately. Now."

Charlie's smile faltered badly after that, and Bill didn't blame him. His own voice was full of something terrible and unspoken. Everyone had lost somebody in the last few years, but so far their family had been lucky—so far they'd been untouched.

He followed Charlie to the back corner where a sleeping bag lay open next to a small fire. Still frozen from traveling outdoors, Bill went toward the fire's warmth at once, passing by Charlie's makeshift table of flat rock as he did so. The table was piled three feet high and gear of all sorts lay tumbling across it. Sticking out from underneath Charlie's wand belt was an old newspaper clipping.

Bill recognized it, grabbed it up at once and stared at it.

All nine of the Weasleys waved up at him from it: himself, his five brothers, his sister, his mother and father—together. They were standing in front of a pyramid, looking sunned, freckled, and beaming. And so young—Ginny still looked like a baby, at twelve, and so did Ron at thirteen. And so did Percy, wearing that damned obnoxious fez. Percy, whose Head Boy badge glinted even now in black and white. Percy had been just seventeen in this picture.

Bill felt a dry sort of seizure creep up in his throat and he turned to Charlie, who was watching him, motionless. There was an odd, fixed terror on his brother's face.

"Bill," he said slowly, "it's one of us. Isn't it."

It wasn't a question.

Bill locked his eyes with Charlie's, and made himself nod.

"Dad," Charlie managed, barely moving his mouth. But before Bill could set his brother straight, there was a voice behind them.

"Pardon, I do not wish to interrupt, but Sharlie, did you see ze dragons, or non?"

Bill turned slightly toward the voice and waved his hand at it, without taking his eyes from his brother's. "Later," he muttered. "Later."

The girl stepped up beside him and drew herself up entirely. She tossed a sheet of hair over her shoulder and glared at him. "I was not speaking to you," she said coldly, before turning to Charlie with a blinding smile. "Sharlie? I need to know eef it iz working. I 'av been asked to leave tomorrow morning for ze next camp, but not unless—"

"I said *later*," Bill barked, turning on her completely as anger rose up in his voice.

The girl, surprisingly unruffled, peered up at him. "Aven't I met you?" she asked curiously.

But Bill had lost his temper. "Are you *deaf*?" he yelled. "GET OUT!" He pivoted away from her to Charlie, who was still motionless, still waiting for the news to hit. Bill had never seen him so pale and he knew this had to be done as quickly as possible, for both their sakes.

"It's not Dad," he communicated in a, low, rapid tone, prepared to have it over with. "Dad's alive. It's Percy."

Charlie clenched his fists until the knuckles were white.

It was done now. All of them knew.

Charlie continued to stand stock still, his eyes painfully dry. "How?" he asked evenly.

Bill continued in the same low, even tone. Better to do it quickly, he thought. Better to get it out. "Fudge asked him to meet with the Death Eaters— for those peace talks that idiot was trying to set up. But Percy wouldn't go. He thought it might compromise Dad and us—our whereabouts. He knew they'd question him. But Fudge wouldn't listen to him—said he didn't care about what happened to the Order. Said we were all setting ourselves up for a fall anyway. Percy ended up leaving the Ministry over it."

Charlie was white all over except for his freckles, which were eerie, almost, against his pallor. Bill wished he didn't have to continue.

"Perce left the Ministry?" Charlie's voice was far less steady now.

"Yes. He'd finally had enough. He was going back to Dad—owled him to let us know he was leaving his office and coming home."

"My God..."

"He was trying to get to Dad—that's when he got caught. He crossed right through a Dark line, you know how those curse shields—"

"He was never any good at anything invisible." Charlie was tight-lipped by now and his eyes were glassy. "He walked into them. Just like that."

"Yes." Bill stopped. He couldn't say the rest of it. The next part of what he had to tell was too awful.

"And then what?" It was the inevitable question.

Bill shook his head pleadingly and looked at Charlie, the answer sticking in his throat. "I can't."

"You have to." Charlie's struggle to remain calm was awful to watch. "Torture?" He couldn't even manage the word. His voice had cracked.

Bill nodded faintly. "Cruciatius," he whispered. "They tried to make Percy give us up. He knew where everybody was, and they knew he knew it. And when he wouldn't say a word... the way Snape tells it, they forced him to take Veritaserum. But what Snape gave him wasn't a Truth Potion at all. Percy realized that he wasn't being controlled, and he lied about where we were. Snape told us that Pettigrew killed him as soon as the words were out of his mouth."

"No—but if Snape was there, why didn't he step in and—"

"It wasn't his fault. He was furious he didn't have a chance to do anything about it."

"Lie!" Charlie's face had contorted with rage and disbelief. Bill understood his brother's reaction; he had been quick to blame Snape, too.

"Charlie, no, listen to me—Snape's done nothing but compromise his own safety. He won't even be able to leave Hogwarts grounds until this war is over. The Death Eaters must've checked Percy's information by now and Voldemort has to know it's false. They'll be after Snape with a vengeance."

Charlie stood mute for a moment in the wake of this argument, shaking his head as if to rid it of a thought that wouldn't leave.

"But—" he finally managed, "you're still telling me—that Percy—"

Charlie didn't speak further. Suddenly, without warning, his strong, muscular frame seemed to collapse inward. He dropped onto his sleeping bag, slumped forward and let out a hard, hollow sob. "I kept thinking," he choked. "I tried not to, but I kept thinking—I mean, there's nine of us—our odds are just terrible. But when it comes right down to it—" Charlie was almost unintelligible now. "Bill, it's Percy. It's you, then me, then Perce. Shit. I taught him how to ride a broom. How *could* they? How *could* they—"

Bill fell heavily to his knees and put his arms around his brother, who was quickly losing control. At another heaving sob from Charlie, Bill felt two days of unshed tears rushing upward from his gut, splitting his chest, tearing out of him.

What the other keepers in the cave thought of them was immaterial to Bill. He held onto Charlie and grieved for the brother he'd lost.

Hours later, after everyone else in the cave was long asleep, Bill remained awake. He watched his brother. Charlie breathed shallowly, his face still pale with shock and grief. Even as he slept, the loss of a brother was written in his expression; he looked as though he might cry again at any moment. Bill stared at him, crouched down, and poked their fire with unnecessary violence.

"Don't you bloody dare die, Charles," he muttered. "Don't you—"

"I am intairrupting again?"

Bill's head snapped up. The girl was standing there, the one he'd hollered at earlier, the witch who was casting the Diversion Enchantment. But she looked different. Earlier all he had noticed was a lot of blond hair and a flashy sort of smile. Now, though, she looked drawn and pale, her hands were trembling, and her eyes were puffy from crying.

She was, without contest, the most beautiful girl that Bill had ever seen.

"I am sorry," she was saying in a small voice, "if I 'ad known.... I should never 'av been so forward."

Bill was on his feet. He wasn't quite sure how he'd gotten there so quickly. The girl looked at him, slightly surprised and obviously wary. She stepped back.

"No," he said quickly, holding out a reassuring hand, realizing that she must think he was about to bite her head off again. "I'm the one who's sorry—I had no business yelling at you. You were just there at a bad moment."

The girl nodded and held her hands up in front of her, cupped together, as though she wanted to offer him something, but couldn't. "I am," she finally said, "so sorry about your bruzzer."

Bill blinked. He didn't quite catch what she meant. "My what?" he asked, reflexively.

The girl frowned a little, bit her lip apologetically and tried again. "Your bruzz-your bruzz-er."

His brother. Then she had been listening. For some reason, the miscommunication made Bill smile.

"Thanks," he said quietly. And then, without knowing why he said it, he asked, "Do you want to see a picture of him?"

It was an odd thing to do—show the old newspaper clipping of his family to this stranger. But he did it anyway, stepping close to the girl so that they could look at it together. She put a finger on the image of Percy and shook her head.

"Young," she whispered, and looked up at Bill. "I met 'im, you know. 'E was vairy smart."

"You met him?"

"'E judged ze Triwizard Tournament and introduced 'imself at ze Ball."

"Oh, so then you were at Hogwarts?" Bill couldn't remember a French student ever studying at Hogwarts, but knowing the open way in which Dumbledore had run things, it certainly wasn't impossible.

The girl smiled sadly, however. "Non, I was ze champion from Beauxbatons." She looked down at the picture again and spoke very softly. "I saw you, as well. You came to watch 'Arry. Zat is why I remembered you, before."

Bill looked at her profile, surprised. He'd only been at Hogwarts for one afternoon of that tournament, and that was nearly three years ago, now. But he didn't do the math aloud for her—she was already blushing slightly. He didn't know what to think of it. Mostly, he wondered how he could have missed noticing her. It wasn't like him to be in the same room with a girl like this, and not notice.

"And I met zis one," she murmured, putting her finger on Fred, "and zis one," she touched George. "And Ron," she said. Bill noticed that she grinned a bit when she touched the picture of his youngest brother, before moving her finger to the picture of Ginny. "Vairy pretty girl," she said absently.

Bill swelled. "Yes, she is, isn't she?" He had an almost paternal sort of pride about Ginny. "Smart, too."

The girl nodded. "Like Gabrielle," she mused.

"Gabrielle?"

"My sister." She retracted her finger from Ginny's image, and dropped her hand.

"How old is she?"

"She would 'ave been in 'er first year, zis fall."

"Would have been..." Bill said, cold realization creeping over him.

The girl's sheet of silvery hair hid her face, as she nodded her head. "You read about ze town of Mont Ste. Mireille," she stated softly, matter-of-factly.

"Yes, of course," Bill replied, horrified. Everyone knew about it. It had been one of the Death Eaters' first organized strikes on a wizarding population outside of Britain—and it was one of their most awful. All the children in that area had been taken, and none returned. Worse, the strike had been for no particular strategic purpose; its aim had merely been to terrify the continent and to show that the Dark army was advancing at full strength. Horror and intimidation. The kind of thing that Voldemort apparently took pleasure in.

The girl stared at the photograph of the Weasleys a moment longer before taking it out of Bill's hand and turning to him. "Your bruzzer died vairy bravely," she said quietly. "Zat 'elps." She placed the picture on Charlie's strange stone desk, lifted her chin, and looked dully toward the mouth of the cave.

Bill had his arms around her before he knew what was happening. All he knew was that he wanted to be closer to her, to share comfort with her—he knew how nightmarish it was to lose like that and to have to go on fighting.

The girl stiffened in his arms at first, but after a moment he felt her palms on his chest. She lay her face sideways between them, under his chin, and abruptly her body relaxed almost to the point of perfect limpness. Taking this as a sign of trust, he pulled her closer and let his cheek rest against her hair. Neither of them moved for a long time, and Bill had the sensation that he had been anchored momentarily, safe from a storm.

When the girl did move, finally, it was only to lift her head. "I 'av to go outside," she said, her voice unsteady. "I 'av to check on ze Diversion before tomorrow."

"Then I'll come with you."

And Bill did so, following her out of the cave and back down the wide, dark trench. It didn't seem nearly as cold, now, and he leaned back comfortably against the dirt wall. He waited silently while she pointed her wand out above the ledge to test the strength of the Enchantment she had cast. She cursed, in French, whenever a weak pocket revealed a flash of gleaming, visible dragon, and said several spells that Bill had never heard to seal the links.

He watched her work, finding himself fascinated. Bill had seen work like this done many times before, yet somehow, the sight of *this* woman building Charms in thin air was riveting. He wondered what she'd say if he told her that he broke spells like this right back down for a living. The idea of it made him grin. He raised his wand when she'd walked off a few steps and wasn't looking, and he barely whispered a spell. He saw the Diversion tense up and shimmer, but fall immediately and invisibly back into place. She was good. The spell was solid and strong.

It took her an hour to finish. When she had done, she walked back to Bill in silence and let her head fall softly onto his shoulder. The gesture was unhesitating, and felt oddly right.

It was strange, he thought, reaching up naturally to stroke her hair, strange that this could happen. His brother was dead. Her sister had disappeared. Tomorrow he'd have to go back beyond the shields he'd come through, to get back to the Order and see Sirius for further instructions. The whole world was shifting. It was the last moment in which he would have expected to find this wordless, wonderful connection with a woman. Yet here it was. It pulled at his gut and he couldn't seem to stop himself from obeying.

"I never got your name," he said suddenly, knowing as he said it that it hardly mattered.

The girl remained where she was. She had relaxed against him and was breathing softly, as if in sleep. "Fleur," she mumbled into his shoulder.

"Fleur," he repeated softly, testing it out. At the sound of her name, she picked up her head and looked at him. The effect on Bill was rather dizzying. Her eyes were unrelentingly blue, only inches away.

"Well it's nice to meet you," he managed huskily, bending his head as he spoke, "Fleur."

Their mouths met. And suddenly Bill wasn't certain if any of it was real: the war above the trench, or the girl in it with him. He lost track of reality after that. He was honestly never sure how he got back into the cave, and when he woke in the morning, it was a mystery to him that he was somehow in a sleeping bag beside Charlie's. His memory felt addled.

And the girl, he discovered over breakfast, was already gone.

"Moved on to her next assignment, and we'll certainly miss her," Charlie joked feebly. Bill watched his brother try to work his mouth into a grin, fail, and shrug at the floor. He looked entirely wiped out.

Bill paused. He felt his timing couldn't be more inappropriate, but he had to ask. He had to know.

"Do you know which camp she went to?"

Now Charlie grinned all right—weakly, to be sure. But it was Charlie's grin. "Love in the trenches, eh?" he jibed. "Going to follow her, William?"

Bill didn't answer. Because the truth was, he thought he might. And Charlie must have read it in his face, because his own expression became more serious.

"Don't Bill, please. It's too dangerous the way things are. You can't go risking your neck." He shook his head ruefully. "Damned veela—they do love to see men risk their necks."

"What?" Bill asked sharply, his heart doing a swift, unpleasant knock on his ribs. "Veela? Is Fleur a veela?"

"Part," Charlie answered. "Not sure how much, but definitely part. Mick over there is a Species Specialist. He told me the minute she arrived. Why?" Charlie nudged Bill with an elbow. "Get you, did she?"

Bill winced, thinking back on his behavior of the night before. It seemed she had gotten him, indeed.

"Do me a favor, Charlie, would you?" he asked briskly, pushing his breakfast away and facing his brother.

"Anything."

"Do a Love Charm repellant on me."

"A counter block? What, now? You're joking."

"Now. And make it permanent, if you know how."

"Come on, Bill, is that really necess—"

"Yes. Can you do it, or do you need me to show you?"

Charlie sighed and waved him off. "No, I know this one. Sit still."

He pulled his wand and raised it. Bill sat back, feeling as though he'd been cheated out of something. Well, he might have fallen for it once, but it wasn't going to happen again. There wasn't time for that kind of weakness. People were dying, and Bill felt suddenly disgusted with himself for having been distracted in the first place. There were too many important things going on for him to get sidetracked. And that's all he had been, he told himself staunchly. Sidetracked.

He shut his eyes and let the magic work on him.

* * * * *

"Bill? ... Bill. ... BILL!"

Bill tossed slightly in his sleep. He felt a hand grab his wrist and begin to shake it unceremoniously around. He groaned and fought against the hand at first, feeling groggy and slightly panicked. He tried to open his eyes. Who had hold of him? Why were they shaking him?

"C'mon you sad prat—get—UP! Right, that's it, I'm feeding you to the Horntail."

At these words, the world fell more into place, and Bill felt a sense of relief. The Horntail. Dragons. That was Charlie's voice. This was just Charlie, tossing his arm around like a puppet. He was in Romania with his brother and everything was safe; the war was over and it had been for a week. He had only been having the nightmare again.

His surroundings established, Bill sighed, deciding to go back to sleep for awhile. This was a difficult job, however, when his arm was being tossed up onto his face. It was also very difficult to ignore Charlie's voice, which continued to bellow above him.

"WILLIAM ARTHUR WEASLEY. Light of my life. Get the hell off my couch, you lazy bastard, you've got an owl and Dad's in the fire."

Bill barely opened his eyes. He squinted up at his brother. "Funny—I was just dreaming about you," he croaked.

"Course you were, doesn't everyone?" Charlie grinned, setting an owl free through the window, then pacing back over to the couch. "Here." He dropped a roll of parchment directly over Bill's face, forcing him to catch it on reflex.

Whether Bill liked it or not, the sudden movement did much to wake him up. He groaned, threw his long legs to the floor, and got to his feet, shaking the dream out of his brain for the umpteenth time, and wondering if the details of what had happened in the war would ever dull for him. The nightmare certainly hadn't dulled at all. It had forced him to relive on many nights, with bizarre clarity, the retelling of Percy's death, and the pain was as sharp now as it had ever been.

That whole night was still as sharp as it had ever been.

Determined to forget the dream in *all* its aspects, Bill blinked sleepily down at the scrolled letter in his hands, realizing that it was marked with the Gringotts seal. He unrolled it and scanned it quickly.

Dear Mr. Weasley,

At this time, I realize that you are scheduled to return to your usual post at the Egypt branch of Gringotts Bank. It has come to our attention, however, that your skills are more necessary elsewhere at the present time.

As you are certainly aware, Gringotts of London has sustained serious damage to both its physical and magical dimensions and must be rebuilt. However, due to the interference of Death Eaters with the bank's magical shields, many employees are hesitant to return. It is impossible to begin reconstruction on the bank itself, therefore, until all signs of Dark magic and possible curses have been investigated and destroyed.

We therefore ask you to consider a temporary transfer to Gringotts' London branch, effective immediately. Please notify us of your decision by return owl as soon as possible, so that we might forward the necessary papers.

Sincerely,

Graf Hogboon,

Head of Gringotts' Curse Breaker Division, Geneva

Bill stared at the letter, not sure what to make of his reaction. Hope and resistance rose up in him all at once.

He had been staying with Charlie for a week now, taking a pit stop with the dragon keepers in Romania, hoping to get a little rest with his brother before returning to business. But he'd realized in just a week's time that the idea of returning to business made him a bit sick to his stomach. He wasn't ready to go back to Egypt.

Usually, Bill loved Egypt. He loved the heat and sand, loved the challenge and isolation that his job brought every so often, loved being on his own in the world and making his way in it. But circumstances lately made him pine to stay at home. His body was tired from war and his mind was, too—the idea of returning alone to his flat, and working in his office as though everything had gone back to normal... well, it just didn't sit right.

But this temporary transfer to London would only prolong his return to Egypt, making it more difficult in the long run, and Bill wasn't one for taking the easy way out of a hard road ahead. He rolled the letter up carefully and tapped it on his palm. If he didn't accept the transfer, then he was scheduled to return to Gringotts of Egypt in the morning.

"C'mon, Bill, Dad's waiting to speak to you." Charlie hollered.

Bill nodded. He could talk to his father about it right now. He dragged his feet into the front room of Charlie's bungalow and stood before his father, roll of parchment in one hand, scratching his head with the other and yawning. "Hi, Dad."

"Bill." His father looked at him, a mixture of amusement and pride showing in his tired face. "It's good to see you."

"You, too—what's happening in London?"

At his simple question, his father's face tightened. Arthur swallowed hard and Bill felt himself stiffen, slightly. His father looked almost... afraid.

"Did both of you see yesterday's *Prophet*?"

Bill exhaled and nodded at Charlie. "Sure we did. Was that all factual? The Dementors really won't act as guards anymore?"

Arthur shook his head gravely. "They won't."

"You know, there has to be a way to destroy those things." Bill looked at Charlie. "What d'you think?"

Charlie shrugged. "Dunno. I've got a mean Patronus, but that's it."

"Boys..."

Both Bill and Charlie turned to their father. His voice was quiet and defeated.

"It's gotten worse."

The hair on the back of Bill's neck stood up. "What d'you mean? What's happened, Dad?"

"I..." Arthur paused, and drew breath. "It's going to be in the papers today, and on the WWN in a few minutes but I wanted to..."

"Tell us." Charlie sat on the floor in front of the fire.

Bill crouched beside him. "Go on."

Arthur appeared to brace himself—only his head was visible in the fire, but Bill knew his father's face so well that he could anticipate him somewhat. Whatever was coming next, it wasn't good.

"Do either of you remember the name Ida Dunnes?"

Bill nodded immediately. "Auror in Dumbledore's heyday, wasn't she? Around the time Grindelwald was taken down."

Charlie turned to him, his face incredulous. "You remember everything you've ever read, don't you?" he muttered.

Bill shrugged. Arthur continued. "She's retired now, and living on Lewis Island in a town called

Stornaway, about forty miles south of Azkaban. Very mixed town-high wizarding population in an area where there are a lot of Muggles. Though of course the Muggles don't know it, for the most part. A lot of intermarriages in that area, though, which is... interesting..."

Arthur trailed off, his voice flat, and for the first time, Bill realized his father's eyes were blood-shot. He exchanged a brief, worried glance with Charlie. Their father was nothing if not easily side-tracked by the meeting points of the Muggle and wizarding society, but today the subject seemed to be giving him no joy.

"Right, Dad, go on. What happened to Ida Dunnes?"

"Nothing." Arthur sighed and pressed his eyes shut. "Ida is alive and well. She was in her local pub last night when a few Muggles came in complaining of a sudden chill and saying it was a bit cold for July. Ida didn't think much of it, until her little grand nephew came running in from outside, pointing and looking frantic, going on about a Dementor down the road."

Bill felt his breath catch. "No," he muttered quickly. "No."

"Well, Ida took off at high speed in the direction her nephew was pointing, and came right across it. It was descending on a small boy outside the boy's home."

"Is he—" Bill couldn't bring himself to finish the question.

"The boy is fine. But his mother was destroyed. She's soulless. She was lying at her son's feet by the time Ida arrived, and Ida told us that the boy was sobbing. Too young to do anything else. Watched his mother get Kissed right there in front of him." Arthur's face was very nearly gray.

Bill felt his bones go cold at the idea of such a sight. He remained crouched next to Charlie, but could think of nothing to say.

"I thought that Dementors... didn't have the same effect on Muggles?" Charlie attempted weakly.

"Muggles can't see them, though I'd reckon they could still get Kissed if they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. We don't know. I don't want to know. In any case, this woman was a witch. She was obviously caught unawares. Just playing with her son, not expecting..."

Arthur's head gave a slow, miserable shake.

"Ida drove the thing back across the water to Moody, who's now established a tally of sorts so that we know how many Dementors there are. We need to know right away if one gets loose. It's just so damned difficult to count them—we *think* we've got them all, but how to be sure? Even if we do, they can't be counted if they keep on hiding in the shadows. Not only that, but we've got to get those prisoners out of there. I knew it was bad, but this is far worse than I'd expected. They're all in immediate mortal danger, where they are."

"Where will you put them?" Charlie asked at once.

"Damned if I know. Anywhere that they can't get out. Which is nowhere that I know of."

"And where's the boy?" Bill demanded.

"With his father. His father was indoors. He's a Muggle. Blaming himself for not being outside to do anything about it—as if he could have." Arthur sighed. "It wasn't his fault. As far as fault goes, you should be aware that his wife's predicament will be blamed on me in all the news. I just wanted you boys to hear it from me, first. Now I'll need to go speak with—"

"Blamed on you!" Bill found his voice at once and shot to his feet in outrage. "I'd like to know why!"

Arthur gave a brief, unnatural laugh. "Because I'm here. Because it was my responsibility to keep those creatures out on the island. If we'd just known a day sooner—just a *day* sooner—that they weren't going to stay put with the prisoners, then we could've had an eye out. But as it was, they didn't get noticeably restless 'til Friday and Moody didn't establish a watch system until Friday night, and by then the thing must've already escaped. We're just lucky it had to travel over water to get to Lewis. They travel more slowly over water. Otherwise it might've done much more damage, in a wizarding community of that size."

"This isn't your fault," Bill averred, his teeth clenched. "You didn't know and you're doing what you can. I'm coming up there."

"Bill, now, that's not why I—"

"I'm coming too." Charlie was on his feet. "And I'm bringing my team, Dad. I know they'll want to give a hand."

Bill stared at his brother. "What? You'll leave dragon keeping? You can't be serious."

"It's no more shocking than you leaving your curse breaking is it? And anyway, d'you think I'd pass up an opportunity to work for the Minister of Magic?" Charlie made a mock-bow to their father. "Not a chance."

Arthur shook his head swiftly. "No. Don't get big ideas, boys. Somebody had to step in for Fudge and there wasn't time for proper procedure after that strike on Diagon Alley last year. I'm just here

when no one else wants to be, that's all." He fixed Bill with a serious stare. "And I don't want you feeling pressured to relocate. You've both got your jobs and we've all got to move on with our lives."

"I know." Bill toyed with the roll of parchment in his hands for a moment. "But Dad, if you don't get help up there, then everybody's getting to move along with their lives except for you." He held up the parchment. "This is from Gringotts. They want me to accept a temporary transfer to London. Effective immediately."

"But that's brilliant!" Charlie cried at once, clapping Bill on the back so vigorously that he nearly sent him into the fire. "Are you serious? Oh, we're definitely coming, Dad. We can take a flat in Diagon Alley, the two of us. And maybe Mick'll be interested in coming along—and a couple of others from my staff would be great help, I know it. The apprentices'll have to stay and train where they are, but I bet I could talk my assistant into coming back to England for at least a little while—"

"Crowd the flat all you like, but *you* can sleep on the couch," Bill jested, reaching around to rub his lower back, where it was a bit sore from having spent the week on Charlie's sofa. "Dad, if you want us, then I'll accept this transfer today. We can be there as soon as I get my new identification."

Their father clearly *did* want them; he was smiling, and it was the first time Bill had seen a real smile on his father's face in quite some time.

"Are you sure you want to accept it, Bill?" Arthur asked, not quite managing to conceal the hope in his voice.

Bill weighed his options briefly. He could go back to Egypt and continue to live his life as it had been before the interruption of war. Or else he could go back to England and assist with the rebuilding of Diagon Alley, possibly giving some help and comfort to his father at the same time.

He met his father's eyes and felt his decision come swiftly and clearly, bringing him comfort, too.

"Absolutely," Bill replied, smiling. "I'm coming, Dad."

Relief flooded Arthur's expression as he turned his eyes on Charlie. "And are you—"

"Dad, I'm *sure*," Charlie interrupted, grinning.

"Well," Arthur said quietly, "since you've made up your minds, I don't mind telling you I'm glad you're coming. Both of you," he said, his voice a bit raw. "And your mother—well she's going to love knowing that you're both nearer home, for a while at least. She'll be so happy when I tell her, it'll be hard to keep her quiet."

"Well then don't tell her!" said Charlie suddenly. "We'll go home with you to the Burrow the day we get to London and surprise her!"

Bill was on it in a flash. "Only, do tell her you're bringing home a couple of colleagues. That way she'll be prepared, and not spend the whole time cooking when she'll want to be fussing over us and telling me to cut my hair."

Arthur beamed at the two of them, his eyes now slightly wet. "You're good boys," he said, in the same raw voice. "I'll see you when you get here. I've got to get to Ron and Ginny at Remus's before they hear about this on the wireless. And I've got to get to the twins. And then—"

There was an abrupt pause. Bill knew that his father had been about to say Percy's name. It was only natural, after all. There had always been seven of them.

"I've told Penelope already," Arthur finished quietly. "Talked to her when I spoke with your mother."

Bill nodded. "See you tomorrow, then, Dad."

"Good." His father's face cheered, a little. "When you get here, come straight to the Ministry."

"To the *Minister's* office?" Bill asked slyly, raising an eyebrow at Charlie, who grinned expectantly.

Their father chuckled. "All right. Yes, that's where I am, say what you want to say about it. Just get here."

With a 'pop' Arthur was gone.

"Hard to believe, isn't it?" Charlie asked, still grinning into the fire. "Our dad."

Bill laughed. He, too, was unused to the fact that his own father was in a position of such high authority. But even if Arthur made light of his situation, Bill knew he was the Minister of Magic. It made sense to Bill to know that the remaining Ministry officials answered to his father. They all trusted him after what he had done in the war. He had organized the Ministry from the inside for Dumbledore and then for Sirius, and he had made the way clear for the Order of the Phoenix to operate without interruption for as long as he could.

Of course, that hadn't always won him approval; many people had been against the Order, during the war. Many had been advocates of Cornelius Fudge. But now that the war was over and the Order had proven instrumental in ending three years of strife, its naysayers were few and far between. Moreover, everyone knew that Arthur Weasley had been present at the moment of

Voldemort's defeat. Everyone knew what had happened to Lucius Malfoy. The fact that people were now looking to his father for their cues, Bill reflected, was only natural. His father had always been willing to do what others backed away from, and that was especially apparent now, as he headed up a Ministry in ruins.

"Dad was always right for it," Bill mused, "it's just that he wasn't ambitious like Fudge and the rest of them. And Mum was right, thinking that Fudge was prejudiced against Dad just because of his concern for Muggles..." Bill trailed off and hesitated before continuing. "You know, it's probably wrong to say this, but we're far better off without Fudge in there, now that everything's got to be rebuilt. The Death Eaters weren't doing themselves any favors when they got rid of him."

Charlie nodded in quiet reply. "Still, it's not right what happened to him."

"No. I didn't say it was."

Bill's stomach still lurched when he remembered getting news of the Diagon Alley strike. Under pretense of agreeing with Fudge that peace talks were a necessity, Death Eaters had been admitted into the Ministry buildings. Many of those buildings now stood in shambles. Fudge had been murdered without ceremony, and his offices raided for information. The Diagon Alley post office had been entirely blown apart in an effort to slow wizarding communications, and many owls and people had died. And in that terrible chaos, the Death Eaters had managed to force their way into Gringotts—slaying goblins as they went. They'd broken apart the upper vaults with Dark magic, corrupting a magical protection system that would be ridiculously difficult to restore.

Bill sighed at the mere *thought* of what it must be like now, at Gringotts of London. Knowing goblins the way he did, he assumed he'd be in for a rough time of it in his new position. Goblins weren't trustful creatures to begin with, and now that they'd been personally attacked, Bill imagined that they'd be positively murderous toward anyone new in their midst. The fact that he had worked for years at the Egypt branch of Gringotts wouldn't mean a thing to the London goblins. In London he would be treated as a stranger and eyed with suspicion and contempt.

Still, he was going. There was no question. He was going to be whatever help he possibly could be to Gringotts—and to his father.

"Hey, Charlie," he asked suddenly, remembering what his father had said about the news, "where's that wireless? I want to hear what they're saying about Dad."

Using his feet, Charlie shoved aside an enormous pile of clothes to reveal a rickety little wizard's wireless. He flicked his wand at it, and a small, badly received female voice buzzed from the hole in its center.

"... that Arthur Weasley, unofficial and apparently incompetent Minister of Magic claimed yesterday to have the Dementor problem well in hand. Be advised that this is not the case. Last night, retired Auror Ida Dunnes—"

"Idiots," Charlie muttered, giving his wand a violent flick and shutting down the wireless in mid-sentence. "I'm not listening to that. Write your goblins, Bill, and get your papers. We need to get to London."

"Right." Bill Summoned his parchment and quill, trying to ignore the anger he was experiencing on his father's behalf for a moment, in order to be productive. "Go round up your team and see who's coming with us."

As Charlie yanked on his robes, Bill began to scratch out his reply to Geneva. If he sent out this owl before noon, he'd have identification in the morning. They could leave for London tomorrow afternoon.

Though suddenly, tomorrow didn't seem nearly soon enough.

A/N: An enormous thank you to Jedi Boadicea. She has quizzed us tirelessly on our loose ends and has helped us to give shape and structure to our plot. In addition, her excellent Bill Weasley fics (if you haven't read them, and all her others, you're missing out on a really good thing) have definitely given us pause for much Bill examination (which is also a *really* good thing). Her wonderful characterization of Bill has informed our own interpretation of him. Thank you, J.B. And an additional thank you to B Bennett, who, in addition to having some really beautiful HP fiction of her own (you'll love it), is the most patient and soothing of beta readers.

— CHAPTER THREE —

Morning News

Morning sunlight spilled into the front room and the air was warm, but light and fresh, as it circulated in through Lupin Lodge's open windows. Lupin Lodge was the name that Remus's parents had given it years ago, and it was rather lodge-like with all its wooden walls and floors. It felt entirely different from the Hogwarts stone dormitories, and had nothing like the precarious tumbledown comfort of the Burrow. Still, it felt really natural here. Ron liked it. He stood on the stairs, sleepily surveyed the front room, and grinned for no reason at all.

Ron imagined he'd like Stagsden, too, though he hadn't had a chance to check out the village yet. He'd only been here a night, after all. But Remus had told them all about it at lunchtime yesterday and it had sounded pretty perfect. This wasn't solely a wizarding settlement—Hogsmeade was the only one of those in Britain—but Remus had assured them all that they'd be fairly safe using their magic in public, and that they could go ahead and order butterbeers at the pub without getting stared at. Most of the Muggles in town that he knew of, he'd said, were married into wizard families, and there was even a field at the other end of town that locals sometimes used for impromptu Quidditch matches.

Quidditch. Ron grinned to himself again, and padded down the rest of the stairs and through the living room, making his way towards the kitchen. It was shaping up to be an excellent summer if there could be Quidditch. It had been a long time since he'd been able to stay up in the air and play without fear of being attacked—or at least, without fear of an attack on Harry. But that was over now. It was all over now. There would be time for the important things. Like Quidditch.

Like Hermione.

Ron stopped and stood outside the kitchen door. From inside, he could hear a faint muttering and turning of pages, and he smiled, feeling a bit of a flutter in his stomach. Hermione was in there, and she was probably by herself—he hadn't heard anyone else get out of bed yet. He paused for a moment before going through the door and looked down at himself—pajama bottoms, T-shirt, bare feet—and he ran a hand through his hair. It was a mess. He had half-turned back to change clothes before he came to his senses and laughed at himself for being self-conscious. It wasn't as if Hermione hadn't seen him looking terrible. That was part of what made it so amazing. She didn't care.

He pushed open the door and his grin broadened. She was standing with her back to him, still wearing her nightdress and dressing gown, and her brown hair was a big mess on her shoulders. She was holding up her wand and peering at a cooking spellbook that lay open on the counter, talking softly to herself.

"Isn't it...? No, that's not it. Is it? Index, index..."

She hadn't heard the door. She was utterly absorbed—as she always was when a book was open in front of her. Ron took the opportunity to pad silently up behind her, pause, and lean close to her ear.

"You're up early."

Hermione shrieked and spun around with her hand on her heart, holding out her wand.

"Ron! Don't scare me like that!"

"No problem. How d'you want me to scare you next time, then?"

She huffed. He grinned. This was his favorite thing in the world; this was what he was good at. Getting to Hermione. He couldn't think of a better way to start the morning, and he reveled in the fact that they were all alone—not in the Gryffindor common room and not in the Great Hall—but alone and still in their pajamas. Together. First thing in the morning. It was incredibly liberating.

"Seriously, though," he said, stepping up and putting his hands lightly on her waist. It was odd, doing this—he felt very daring. Even though he knew he was allowed to do it, even though they had

this trust together, and even though she was putting her own arms up around his neck and looking in his eyes... it was still very new, and very surprising. Especially since he found that it was difficult to make jokes with Hermione looking at him dead-on like this. He couldn't always find his voice. And now, she was playing with the hair at the nape of his neck, as she had done only once or twice before. He shut his eyes and hoped there'd be more time for it now.

"This is going to be a peaceful summer, for once," she sighed. "Isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is," he answered determinedly. They deserved a peaceful summer. A nice, long break from everything. They could talk about normal things—they could relax, finally. Ron looked over Hermione's shoulder at her spellbook. "What are you doing in here?" he asked. "Cooking or something?"

Hermione frowned a little. "Well, I was going to make breakfast, and I'm sure it's very simple, but—you know, Ron, it's so strange, I was Petrified when the rest of you did the practical applications of basic Cooking Charms in school, and I thought I'd practiced on my own, but I was never *tested*... and I suppose it's because I'm Muggle-born and never saw it all used at home, but.... I don't know how to do any of it."

"Never thought I'd hear you say anything like that."

"Oh, be quiet."

Ron kept hold of her waist as she raised up on her tiptoes, holding his shoulders for balance. She kissed him quickly. He tried to engage her in a fuller kiss, but she broke away and peered over his shoulder at the door. "Not in the kitchen, Sirius will be down soon—I think I heard him up."

"Where, then?" he said meaningfully.

"Ron."

"*Hermione*." He raised an eyebrow at her. She bit her lip, and glanced over his shoulder again.

This really was going to be a good summer, and Ron could think of very little that he wanted to do with it, other than find somewhere quiet with Hermione and make up for lost time. There was a lot of lost time. And if she was going to be staunch about the girls sleeping in one room and the boys staying in another... Well. Ron hardly disagreed with that, really. Even if it *would* be nice to stay in a room with Hermione, it would also be... weird. Especially with everybody knowing all about it. Not to mention that it wouldn't have left Harry and Ginny with much of an option, and although Ron had a funny feeling that the two of them had more going on together than Harry had ever let on....

Well, he reflected, even if they did, he didn't really need to know about it just now. It was better that the rooming arrangements stood as they did.

But that didn't mean he had to stay away from Hermione all *day*, as well. She was still standing right there, with her lip between her teeth, looking very much as if she couldn't decide whether or not to let him kiss her in the kitchen. He made up her mind for her, bending his head to softly kiss her bitten lip. She made a funny little noise—a noise he loved. And then, seeming to make up her own mind about the situation, she pulled away swiftly and turned in his arms to face her spellbook again.

Ron sighed loudly, but gave up on kissing for the time being, and remained standing behind her, holding her around the waist.

"So it's *Fluos*..." she continued in a moment. "Oh, of course it is, it *has* to be—this is ridiculous, this shouldn't be difficult, I've done millions of harder Charms on the first try."

"What are you trying to do?"

"Just coffee."

"You *drink* coffee?"

"No, but..."

Ron felt her lean back against him. He watched as she lowered her wand. When she continued to speak, her voice shook a little. "It's probably silly. I know it's silly... but I suppose I just wanted the smell of it. My house always smelled like coffee, in the mornings, in the summers..." Her voice grew very small until it disappeared altogether.

Ron tightened his arms around her and put his face in her hair, wishing there was something he could do. Of course Hermione missed her house. He knew how much she missed her parents.

"They're going to be okay," he told her, his voice low and adamant. He'd told her that a thousand times, but he still didn't know if either of them actually believed it. Thanks to a very deliberate, very particular attack by Lucius Malfoy, the Grangers had been in the same state as Neville Longbottom's parents for the past year and a half. Ever since the Christmas of their sixth year, Mr. and Mrs. Granger had remained incurably insane in the wizard hospital. St. Mungo's was no closer now to finding a remedy for those mentally damaged by the Cruciatus Curse than they had been sixteen

years ago, when it had happened to the Longbottoms.

Hermione nodded. "I hope so," she said quietly.

"D'you want to visit them soon? I know there hasn't been much time these last few months."

"Yes, I do. I do. Of course."

But though Hermione's words were adamant, her tone was unconvincing. Ron thought that he knew why. Hermione had told him once last year that though she wanted to be with her parents, it felt futile to visit them. It made her angry. She'd burst out that it made her feel so helpless to see them frozen in their fear that she never wanted to go back to visit them again. "*Of course I'd never just leave them,*" she'd told him rapidly, through tears. "*But Ron, I never want to see them like that again.*"

And all he was ever able to do was stand there and rock her, as he was doing now. Stand there, and rock her—and hate the Malfoys with all his heart.

"As soon as we get our Apparition Licenses I want to go," she was saying. "But you don't have to come with me if you don't—"

"Of course I'm coming with you." He'd gone with her, back and forth, dozens of times last summer. Toward the end of summer, Harry had come along as well. Because of her parents' condition, Hermione had spent the last summer entirely at the Burrow with the Weasleys, sharing Ginny's room. Ron had never let her go to the hospital by herself then, and he didn't plan on it now. She was in tears after every visit. "We can go down, stay with Mum, whenever you want. Every week, if you want. Every day. You just let me know. And we don't have to wait for our licenses—if you want to go by Floo powder we can go today."

"Thank you," she said in a muffled voice, turning her head quickly toward him. He leaned over her shoulder and kissed her swiftly, comfortingly. She kissed him back, with as much comfort for him. "But I want to wait. There's no... there's no *point* in being there. They don't know I'm there. I... I just want to wait." She paused, and pulled his arms more tightly around her. "And I'll go with you to visit the memorial stone, while we're in the south. We can do that as often as you need. You just let *me* know. All right?"

Ron kissed her again softly, in lieu of a thank you, and pressed his face into her neck. The memorial stone was for Percy. After the Death Eaters had murdered Percy in February, his body had gone unrecovered. It was still a shock. Ron had never been *close* to Percy, but it didn't matter. Percy was his brother. *Had been* his brother. And it was painful work to put a brother in the past tense every single time he came to mind, especially when Ron could never think of Percy without remembering the way in which he'd died.

Ron shivered. He knew a little something about being in the company of Death Eaters. He knew about fear and torture. He'd never given Harry or Hermione all the details of his time as the Death Eaters' prisoner—they'd had enough to deal with—but he knew *precisely* what his brother's last moments had been like. Perhaps that was why he couldn't stop imagining the scene in his mind. Percy, bound and surrounded. Percy, suffering the Cruciatus Curse. Percy, realizing what he had to do and squaring himself to do it. And Percy *had* stood up bravely; they knew that much. Snape had answered all of the Weasleys' frantic questions and given them every detail that they wanted. Percy had died with his head up, buckling only when hit by the flash of green light that had taken his life.

Ron had damned Pettigrew bitterly in his mind every day since it had happened. It still stunned him that the rat that he had carried around in his pocket for three years and who had lived with his family for twelve had betrayed Harry's parents and been responsible for his own brother's death. And even as satisfying as Pettigrew's death had been, it didn't change the fact that Percy was gone. Not to mention that Percy's death was also one more reason to hate the Malfoys. Because Lucius Malfoy had been there then, too. Snape had told them that. Pettigrew had tortured and murdered Percy while Lucius had looked on.

He shivered again. It could just as easily have ended that way for *him*, and he knew it, though he tried very hard never to think about it. He'd just been a hell of a lot luckier than Percy.

He lifted his face from the skin of Hermione's neck and rested his chin on the top of her head. He had Hermione to thank for his lucky escape. He had Hermione to thank for a lot of things—Hermione and Harry. He owed them both his life and he was proud to be able to say that he would give it for either one of them.

But, proud or not, he hoped that none of them would be called on to offer their lives again. Hopefully, they could just recover for awhile. Ron rocked Hermione for another moment in silence, knowing that there was relief in this closeness, for both of them. He was grateful to have this. At least it lent a sort of wholeness to the grief.

"I hope your mum is all right," Hermione murmured finally, lacing her fingers through Ron's.

"If we visit anybody, it should really be her. She and Penny could do with company. Penny looked terrible at Percy's service."

Ron started a little, and felt his stomach squirm guiltily. "Yeah. I know."

"Is your mum upset that the four of us came here, instead of going to the Burrow?"

"Yeah."

Hermione craned her head a little to look at him. "She said something about it?"

Ron shifted uncomfortably. "She wrote and said we should do whatever we think is the *right* thing," he ventured. Ron never knew what his mum meant by that, and it always made him feel terrifically guilty, no matter what he decided.

"And you don't think you are? Why not?"

"I don't know if I am. I don't know who it's right for."

"Well, I think it's right for us all to be together."

"Me too."

"And I think it's right if we stay with Harry right now."

"Mum wanted him at the Burrow."

"Sirius wants him *here*," Hermione frowned, thoughtfully. "I think it's fair to Harry and Sirius, more than anything. They've been waiting so long for a little time together. And I suppose that they don't need us here—you and Ginny and I could all go to your house instead—but I just don't want us to separate."

"Well, Ginny could go to be with Mum."

Hermione looked at him severely. "That's not fair and you know it, after everything she's done. And you *know* she wants to be with—"

Ron waited for the inevitable end to her sentence, but Hermione had stopped talking and was looking over Ron's shoulder again. When she continued, it was in quieter tones. "You know she wants to be with us. *I* want her with us. And I know that all my reasons are selfish, but this is our first summer really *together* and honestly it's probably our last one—"

"What?" Ron turned Hermione around by the shoulders. "What are you talking about, our last one?"

Hermione turned a bit pink. "Nothing," she said quickly. "I just meant that we'll all end up taking jobs and things, by the end of the summer, won't we? And then we'll be apart for a bit."

"We'll be able to Apparate to work. We can all still be close together when the summer's over. It's not like we're *going* anywhere."

Hermione shrugged, and turned around again to face her spellbook. "You know," she said briskly, "I'm not much in the mood for learning spells. I guess if I can't work out the coffee, I'll just make tea. At least I know the Boiling Charm."

Ron raised an eyebrow. Whatever she thought she was hiding, she wasn't doing a very good job of it. Her abrupt subject changes were as old as the hills and there was always something behind them. But he knew her too well to push the subject right now. He'd have to get it out of her later. And in any case, she was now very busily Summoning tea from the far cupboard, when what she really wanted was the coffee.

He pulled his wand from his waistband. "No, don't bother. Unless *you* want some tea, that is—*Fluos Fabas*," he said, holding the wand up over the pot and coffee that Hermione had already set out. Coffee began to brew at once, and Ron had to agree that the smell was heavenly. He thought he might even give it a try.

"Ron! You drink coffee? I never saw you drink it at school."

"I never did."

"Then when did you learn to make it?"

"If you knew how many times I'd heard my mum do that spell," he replied with a laugh. "I can probably actually cook a lot of things, though I hate to admit it."

"You can't!"

"Right, of course I can't. Good looking coffee there, isn't it?" He grinned and waggled his eyebrows at her. "Seems *you* might need a bit of help, though. Maybe *you* should go live with Mum. Learn a thing or two."

Hermione broke free of his arms then, wrapped her dressing gown around herself importantly and made a show of stomping across the kitchen to the bread-box. "Ha, ha, *ha*. I'm *sure* that I can cook without any trouble, after a bit of practice."

"Sure you can. So, what are you going to do with that bread there?" He leaned back idly against the counter and watched her.

"Toast it, of course."

"How?"

Hermione looked at the bread, and back at Ron, clearly chagrined. "Well, if you would just *give* me the spellbook, I'm sure I could—"

But Ron was holding it up above his head. This was another game he rather loved. She couldn't reach it. "Sure, come and get it, here it is."

Hermione abandoned her bread on the countertop, stepped up close to Ron and tried to bring his arm down manually, but to no avail. He was much stronger. After struggling for a few seconds in this way, she stepped back, raised her wand, and pointed it at the book.

"*Accio!*" The spellbook flew expertly into her hands. "Ha! Got it."

"What *is* going on in here?" The voice in the door was highly amused. Ron looked over Hermione's head to see Sirius standing there, shaking his head at them and grinning. Ron grinned back; wondering how much Sirius had seen and heard of their sparring. He found he didn't care too much either way.

"Nothing. Hermione's going to toast something. Come on and watch."

"Ron, I swear..." she was flicking furiously through the book now, finally reaching the page she wanted. She pointed her wand at the two pieces of bread that lay on the counter and muttered something. Nothing happened.

"Are you sure that's a real spell?" Ron asked innocently.

Hermione glared at him. "Let's see you do it, then, if you're so clever," she shot back.

Ron knew that the smile on his face was probably insufferable, but it was really too good an opportunity to pass up. In a shake of his wand, the toast was perfect, and the only thing more perfect, in Ron's view, was the look on Hermione's face. She looked horrified. It was probably the first Charm he'd bested her at in the entire time they'd known each other.

"Here, Ron," Sirius tossed the rest of the loaf across the kitchen and Ron caught it easily. "Want to do the rest of it up? I heard some noises upstairs; we'll probably have everyone down here hungry in a minute."

"Sure, I'll do it, no problem—and Hermione, here's something you can do until you know better: set the table."

He knew she'd ignore that suggestion in a hurry, and she didn't disappoint him. "Good morning, Sirius," she said graciously. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Would I like one?" Sirius laughed. "I *need* one. But you don't have to do that."

"Oh, don't worry. *She* didn't," Ron couldn't resist saying, as he toasted the bread and piled it on a plate. Hermione looked at him as though she wanted to put a hex on him as she went by, carefully carrying a cup of coffee to the table.

Sirius took it. "Is this what it's going to be like? You all cooking and cleaning up and taking care of us old men?"

Ron snorted and looked him over. Sirius was hardly as old as his *parents*. "What are you? Fifty?"

Sirius spat out some of his coffee. "Not yet forty!" he spluttered. "Do I look *that* old?" He recovered and took another gulp of coffee, then nodded at Ron, a wry smile twisting at his mouth. "You may be an insulting git, but at least you make strong coffee. Thanks. Remus makes it like tea, it's disgusting."

"Remind me, would you, never to make you anything again?" Remus approached the table, bleary-eyed. "Good morning Hermione. Ron."

"Morning," they chimed in at the same time. Still laughing over Sirius's distress, Ron threw Hermione a grin. She returned it. He flew the toast through the kitchen doors to the table and sat down beside her, holding his own cup of coffee. He tasted it, deciding that coffee wasn't half-bad, though it was rather bitter on its own. Quickly he added a bit of milk and tried again. Finding that more to his taste, he grabbed a piece of toast, then sat back and looked out the window.

"Perfect day."

"What are you going to do with it?" Remus looked at Ron, and then at Hermione. "Any plans, for the summer?"

Ron shook his head. "Nope. No plans, no troubles, no nothing. I mean, I'll look for a job or something, make a bit of money...but that's about it."

"What kind of job?" Sirius asked, grabbing toast.

Ron shrugged. "Dunno. Haven't had much time for thinking about that sort of thing." He looked at Hermione. "I know you found the time somehow, but you're completely mad, so that's different."

"Have you been putting in applications, Hermione?" Remus looked interested. "Do you know what you'd like to try doing?"

Hermione looked at Ron—somewhat timidly, he thought—and when she gave her answer, she did so slowly. “Well... there are a *lot* of things that interest me...”

Ron nudged her with his elbow. “Go on, tell them how many positions you applied for.”

“Ron, no—I don’t—” Hermione protested, making one of her modest attempts not to look pleased.

“How many?” Sirius asked keenly.

“Oh, not that many, really, it isn’t—”

“Twenty-seven.” Ron shook his head and grimaced. “Can you believe that? Fighting Voldemort, making up giant sacrifice spells, getting about a hundred thousand N.E.W.T.’s, and she found time for twenty-seven job applications.” He sighed and clapped her on the back affectionately. “Someday, we’re going to get her to take a holiday.”

“Proud of her, aren’t you?”

Ron’s head snapped up. Ginny was in the kitchen, already dressed, pouring herself an orange juice. She smiled at him impishly and he felt his ears getting a bit hot. The truth was, he *was* proud of Hermione. How could he not be proud of her? He’d never understood how she made so much time in the day for all the things she wanted to accomplish; her mind and her focus continually impressed him. But he hardly wanted to make a big speech about it in front of everybody else, especially Remus and Sirius, who were now exchanging a knowing glance that made Ron feel a bit stupid.

Hermione, however, was looking at him with a shy little smile on her face. A moment later, under the table, Ron felt her hand briefly on his knee. She didn’t mind if he was proud of her, it seemed.

He slipped his hand under the table and covered hers with it, lacing their fingers together. She looked back down at her toast to hide a blush, and Ron’s heart leapt to see it. Maybe Ginny’s comment hadn’t been such a bad idea, after all.

Still, turnabout was fair play.

“Where’s *Harry*?” he asked, too casually, raising an eyebrow at his sister. Under the table, Hermione squeezed his fingers hard. She didn’t like for him to tease Ginny about Harry, and though Ron knew it, he generally ignored her advice on the subject. Hermione might’ve known about a lot of things, but sibling raillery wasn’t one of them.

“Asleep, I imagine,” was Ginny’s cool reply. “Anybody else want juice?”

Before Ron could think up a good retort, there was a swishing sound and a blur of gray feathers in front of his eyes. An owl had come in the window, and it was now hopping up and down next to Hermione’s napkin.

Quickly she untangled her hand from Ron’s, untied the letter and read it. When she looked up again, she was shining.

“From one of my applications,” she said, her voice shaking a little. “I got it.”

“A job? You got a job?” Ginny squealed, running over to read over her shoulder. Ron leaned in and did the same.

“At the Ministry?” he asked, a bit awed upon seeing the letterhead. “Damn, Hermione.”

She turned to him, excitement written all over her face. Ron silently added a notch to the tally he was keeping of swear words that he could get past Hermione’s notice, as she began talking very rapidly. “I can’t believe it. I never thought I’d get this. I shouldn’t have gotten this, I don’t have the experience for it—I’ve hardly traveled and I—”

“What, France and Bulgaria don’t count?”

Hermione gave Ron an impatient look. “The Assistant to the British Ambassador of Magic has to be really worldly. Not just book-smart.” She sighed at the paper. “But I got it.”

“Of course you got it!” Ginny dropped into the chair on Hermione’s other side and beamed at her. “You’re worldly if anyone is, Hermione—think of the things you’ve done! Do you think you’ll take it?”

But Hermione was shaking her head. “I... don’t know,” she said soberly. “I can’t say.”

Ron stared at her, disbelieving. “You don’t know. The Ministry wants you to work for them and you don’t *know*?”

“Well it’s hardly the Ministry right now, is it? It’s in disrepair,” she replied, laying down the letter and looking very thoughtful.

“It needs people like you,” said Sirius, at once, leaning forward on the table. “How else will it get rebuilt?”

Hermione turned to Ron. “And your dad’s practically the Minister of Magic now. I’d be working for him, ultimately, if I said yes.”

Ron felt himself swell with pride. He couldn’t get over the fact that his dad—*his* dad—was finally where he deserved to be.

"Dad would let you get away with murder," Ginny commented, from Hermione's other side. "You could put magical creatures in office, if you worked for him. You could make S.P.E.W. into a national organization."

Ron groaned. "Oh right, that's all we need. Don't give her any more ideas, or this time next year we'll all be celebrating Elf Awareness Day."

Remus and Sirius laughed at that. Hermione did as well, but she poked Ron in the side with her elbow.

Ron nudged her. "Go on, Hermione, you'd love working there. Who's acting as Ambassador right now, anyhow?"

"I think it's Parvati's mum."

"The Patils? Oh, right. Well, see? That's great, it'd even be people you know."

But Hermione didn't look convinced. In fact, she looked as if she was suffering some sort of struggle. "It's all true, and I *know* that I should be jumping at the chance, but... My parents."

She didn't have to say anything else. Everyone grew quiet, and nodded. That was a definite consideration, and Ron couldn't believe he hadn't thought of it himself. Of course an ambassadorial position would take her away from Britain, and away from her parents.

And away from *him*. Ron sucked in his breath quietly as he realized he'd just been encouraging Hermione to go away for weeks at a time. He tightened his grip on her hand. To be separated now was the last thing he wanted.

There was a short silence, which Sirius broke. "Well, wherever you decide to go, Hermione, I'm sure you'll be an asset. The Ministry could use your brains, but so could plenty of other places, I'm sure. We've all got a duty to help somewhere." He picked up his coffee cup and glanced at Remus, whom, Ron noticed, was suddenly looking strained. Sirius continued. "I'm going to start work up at the Ministry this morning. Arthur needs all the help he can get—he was looking peaked."

"Was he?" Ron looked up. "I'll bet. Have you talked to him since yesterday?"

"No, but I'm going up there after breakfast." Sirius gulped his coffee again.

"Where to?" Ron asked. "Azkaban?"

"No." The answer came from Remus. His voice was mild, but absolutely adamant, and Ron wasn't surprised to see Sirius shoot another look at him. Sirius looked a little bit irritated.

"I'll go wherever Arthur needs me," was Sirius's abrupt reply. "We've got to relocate all those prisoners. Now. And then we've got to sort the guilty ones from the innocent."

Hermione was frowning now. "But I thought that the Aurors and the Hit Wizards and the rest of you had only brought in escaped prisoners and Death Eaters—how can any of them be innocent?"

"It's precisely the same as what happened last time," Sirius said, his eyes dark.

"They're not all saying they were under the Imperius Curse?" Ron asked, incredulous. In their conversation with Sirius at yesterday's lunch, he had told them only that the Dementors were trying to escape Azkaban, and then he'd moved away from the subject very quickly. It hadn't even crossed Ron's mind that the guilt of the Death Eaters might be a real issue. "They can't possibly think they're going to get away with that again!"

Sirius shook his head firmly. "The problem is, Ron, that last time there were a handful of people telling the truth—about that, and about other things. I should know," he said lightly, and smiled. But Ron noticed that it wasn't a real smile at all. It only existed on the surface.

"In any case," Sirius went on, "we have to establish a place for the current prisoners, and then come up with a way to confine them until we can try them properly. Then we're going to have to collect evidence, investigate claims, test the wands, hold the hearings, all of it. One by one. It's going to be..." Sirius trailed off and looked at Remus. "Difficult. To say the least."

Ron raised his eyebrows dubiously. It sounded worse than difficult—it sounded impossible. He remembered the years in his childhood, during which his father had been trying to help sort the innocent from the guilty after Voldemort's first go-around. It had been something of a nightmare. No one had been able to determine what was actually true, and Ron had a few doubts as to whether Sirius would really be able to do the things he was talking about doing. But he wasn't about to voice those doubts.

"Good luck, Sirius," Ginny said. But there was audible doubt in her voice, too.

The dining table went quiet for a moment after that. Just as the quiet became a bit uncomfortable, there was another sudden rush of air and feathers past Ron's face—and another—and another—

Within minutes, there were a dozen owls all vying for Hermione's attention—it was all she could do to untie the letters from their legs before they covered the table entirely with their feathers.

"Hogwarts timing."

Harry had appeared in the door, and Ron turned to look at him. He was dressed, but badly, as

if he hadn't cared at all what he'd been pulling on, and he pointed at the owls vaguely, a strained smile on his face. It was exactly like the smile that Sirius had given earlier. Beneath it, Harry looked distant, and disinterested.

Ginny nodded at Harry. Ron watched her. She'd treated Harry this week as if he looked perfectly normal, and she always spoke to him as if he were listening, even when he clearly wasn't.

"Well, these *are* the Hogwarts owls, Harry," she said.

"Are they?" Harry asked absently. He took a seat and stared at the birds, which were positively fighting to get to Hermione's hands. She thrust one at Ron.

"Help me, would you, please?"

"They're our old school owls, yes," Ginny continued, taking one of the owls along with Ron, and giving Hermione assistance. "A lot of the Ministry and London post owls were injured or killed, you know, in that Diagon Alley blast. Right before the Death Eaters broke open Gringotts." She paused to caress the wing of the owl she was holding. "Poor things. So last week, Professor McGonagall had me send a lot of the school owls up to Dad. After all, Hogwarts won't need them this year."

Harry put his chin in his hand and began to pick at a piece of toast. He didn't eat any of it. "I can't believe Hogwarts is really going to close."

"Just for a year, Harry."

"It was supposed to be your seventh year, though. Aren't you upset? I would be."

Ginny shrugged. "I guess I just don't want to be upset anymore," she said, handing Hermione the note she'd untied, and picking up another tiny owl. "Hermione, how many letters does this make?"

Another handful of owls had come in while they had been talking. Hermione finished accumulating her replies, sent all the owls off with a wave and counted the slips of parchment in her hand. "Fifteen," she said, sounding disbelieving. "That's more than half of the positions I applied for."

"And what do they say?"

Ron reached over and took the letters, reading them out one by one. "Here we are—'Dear Miss Granger, we are pleased to inform you that'... well, you got that one. 'Ms. Hermione Granger, thank you for your interest in our firm, please contact the following office to schedule an interview so that we may determine your post with us. You will begin in September'... you got that one, too. Let's see. Yes... yes... yes... yes..." Ron read through the letters. Each one was an acceptance. Hermione's face grew pinker and more shocked at each one.

"I didn't really get them *all*, Ron—you're having me on."

"I'm not. 'Dear Miss Granger, we are so impressed with your work that we can hardly express our excitement in a letter'..."

"You made that up!"

"Read it."

Hermione did so and her eyes grew round. "Well," was all she said, when she had finished reading the glowing report of her abilities. "Well. I suppose this means that I have... options."

Remus laughed. "Not surprising, is it? You're a bright young woman, Hermione. It's wonderful to see that people appreciate it."

Ron watched Hermione flush even redder, and felt the swell of pride toward her again. She was something, she really was. When a tardy owl flew through the window a moment later, he directed it with his hand. "Over here, this is the girl you want," he said, motioning the owl closer.

This owl, however, had a different agenda. It landed squarely in front of Harry, whose eyes widened slightly.

"What?" He looked at the note and frowned. "It's mine. I don't know why. Everyone who's ever written me a letter is sitting here." He paused. "Except Hagrid."

Everyone was silent while Harry untied the note and read it. Hermione looked worriedly at Ron, who shook his head. Harry's tone for the past week had been flat and impenetrable. And the comment about Hagrid—well, it was just plain morbid.

Ginny allowed the owl to sip at her juice for a moment, seeming none too upset by Harry's tone. "What does it say?" she asked momentarily, when the owl had flown again.

Harry finished the letter, laughed harshly, looked up, and caught Ron's eyes instead. "See for yourself."

Ron reached out and took the parchment. He and Hermione scanned it together. It was an invitation from the Aurors, for Harry to come and train with them. Ron read it aloud for the benefit of everyone else, and then caught eyes with Harry again, whose face was gravely set. He didn't move.

"Wow, Harry, that's..." But because of the furious look in his best friend's eyes, he didn't know

what to say. "I mean, obviously it's an honor, but, well," he stumbled, coming to a halt.

"Goodness, doesn't it seem a bit, well, *soon* for this kind of thing?" Hermione said hesitantly. "Unless of course you *want* to take it, Harry?"

"An honor?" Harry's voice was sharp. "Do I *want* to take it?" He looked from one to the other of them as if they were mad. "What do you think? Do I want to go up to London and help Mad-Eye with the Death Eaters? Use a lot of curses? Practice constant vigilance?" He laughed bitterly. Ron felt cold at the sound of it. Harry was so walled-off lately that it was almost impossible to tell where he was coming from.

Ginny put a hand out toward him, but Harry leaned back to avoid contact with it. "I think I can pretty safely say," he said, crumpling the letter and tossing it into the center of the table, "that I'll never do anything like that again as long as I live."

More silence followed this avowal, and the quiet frustrated Ron. It seemed that every other moment since the end of the war had been wordless and strained, and he was tired of the tension. He watched Harry fix his eyes on his plate again and continue the systematic destruction of his toast, and Ron felt at once sympathetic that his friend was so obviously destroyed, and irritated that Harry could so callously reject an offer that most people would have been in raptures over. But then, that was nothing new; Harry had always done that. Ron looked to Hermione, hoping that she might offer some comment to break the uneasy stillness. But Hermione was watching Harry with anxious eyes, and she didn't seem to have any more idea what to say than Ron did.

It was Ginny who ended the quiet. She raised her wand and flicked it toward the side table to turn on the wireless, then sat back and returned her attention to her juice and toast. After a bit of static from the wireless, a female voice began to drone in an affected tone of businesslike concern.

"It's set to the WWN news," Remus commented, raising his wand. "But I'm sure you'd all prefer music?"

"Wait!" Ron held up his hand. He had heard the newscaster say his father's name. Everyone in the room stayed still and listened, as the news report continued.

"... that Arthur Weasley, unofficial and apparently incompetent Minister of Magic—"

"How *dare* they!" Ginny cried, pushing her chair back from the table. Ron waved a hand at her to make her quiet; he wanted to hear the rest of it.

"— claimed yesterday to have the Dementor problem well in hand. Be advised that this is not the case. Last night, retired Auror Ida Dunnes of Lewis Island, was forced to drive a Dementor from a highly populated residential area in Stornaway."

Sirius was on his feet. He stalked to the side table, his wand out before him, as though sending a Patronus at the wireless might become a need at any moment.

"Tragically, Dunnes received news of the Dementor's presence only moments too late."

Ron watched as Sirius gripped the side table with both hands. "Damn it, Arthur," he muttered, "why didn't you just *tell* me you needed help." He had gone sheet white, and Ron saw that Remus had now pushed his chair back too, and was watching Sirius carefully.

"Dunnes arrived at the residence of John and Kitty Douglas in time to save the couple's only child, Ewan, upon whom the Dementor was descending. Though Dunnes was able to drive it back, it was too late for the child's mother. Kitty Douglas had already been Kissed and is now beyond rescue; she has been committed to the Post-Dementor Soul Termination ward at St. Mungo's. Six-year-old Ewan has lost his mother and will be raised by his father, a Muggle, who has every intention to quit wizarding society and take his son with him."

Everyone in the room looked at Harry together.

"He has also announced his intention of spreading the word on Dementors to the general populace. At this point, Memory Charms have been employed—"

The newscast cut off abruptly. Harry had shot to his feet, his wand out. His hand trembled and he shook his head slowly from side to side, opening his mouth as if to say something, though nothing came out.

And then he was gone from the kitchen. A moment later, through the front window, Ron could see Harry striding past the house and down the road, his Firebolt in his hand. Ron sighed heavily and looked at Remus.

"This is going to take time, right?"

Remus nodded, though his gaze was still trained on Sirius, who continued staring at the wireless as if in shock. "Just let him burn it off, Ron" he advised absently. "He does need time. Let him go."

Ron was willing to submit to Remus's advice, simply because he didn't know best what to do for Harry, anymore. Ginny, however, did not seem to want to heed it. She had already gotten up quietly and carried her dishes to the sink, and now she was doing her best to slip out of the kitchen without anyone noticing.

Ron stopped her. "Ginny, I don't think—"

"I'm not going to talk to him," she interrupted, resolute. "I'm not going to say anything. But I *am* going."

And then she was gone as well, out of the house and past the window; where they could all see her walking determinedly after Harry, her ponytail swinging.

"I'm going, too," Sirius said briefly, raking a hand back through his hair. "I'll be back when I can."

"Padfoot—" Remus began, but stopped short at the sound of a soft 'pop'. Sirius had Disapparated.

The three of them left in the room exchanged worried stares. It didn't help Ron to know that Hermione and Remus were clearly at as much a loss for what to do as he was. He was worried for Harry, and sick to his stomach at the idea that his father was being blamed for what had happened to that woman.

"Guess Dad's worse off than we thought," he ventured, and then felt a rush of anger. "Incompetent," he muttered to himself. "Load of rubbish."

"Of course it is," Hermione said at once. "It isn't your dad's fault, what happened to that poor woman. They're just blaming him because he's the one in office."

"It will pass," Remus agreed. "And most people will know it's not the truth. We're all trying to help him however we can."

Ron looked up at Remus. "Are you going up to the Ministry with Sirius, then?"

He saw Remus tense, slightly, and felt Hermione's hand touch his leg under the table.

"There's a law," she reminded him, quietly.

Ron fidgeted. Of course there was a law, he *knew* that—it prevented classified 'beasts' from being employed at the Ministry of Magic. He shrugged awkwardly, and was about to attempt an apology to Remus when he was interrupted by a loud and very familiar voice from the front room.

"RON? GINNY? ANYBODY AT HOME?"

It was his father, sounding urgent. Forgetting his apology for the moment, Ron raced toward the front room with Hermione close behind him. They skidded to a halt in front of the fireplace.

"Ron." Arthur nodded at him, his face weary. "Hermione. Where's Ginny?"

"She's gone out already—but Dad," Ron burst, unthinkingly, "what in hell were they talking about? What's happening with the Dementors?"

"We were listening to the WWN," Hermione said calmly, stepping up beside him. "Are you all right, Mr. Weasley?"

Arthur sighed angrily. "I meant to get to you before that newscast did, but I got sidetracked by reporters. Again."

"They're saying it's your fault—what's that about?" Ron demanded.

"It *is*, in a manner of speaking," Arthur replied evenly.

"It isn't." Remus had entered the room. "Don't take that on yourself. Sirius just Disapparated—you can expect him in your office in a few seconds. I imagine he's smashing through security right about now."

Arthur laughed, a little. "Well, I can definitely use him." He turned his eyes on Ron. "I'd better go. I just wanted to let you know not to worry about this. There's going to be a lot of me in the news, and it's not going to be good, and you'll just have to get used to it. I don't want it interfering with your summer."

"But Dad—" Ron began to protest, feeling that he really ought to be of help in some way.

"Get outside, go on," Arthur urged. "I'll be happier if I know you're getting a rest. And look out for your sister."

Ron nodded and, out of the corner of his eye, saw his old professor square himself slightly.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Arthur?" Remus asked quietly.

"Nothing, yet. But Remus, as soon as we've got Azkaban figured out, my next priority is getting rid of a few ridiculous restrictions around here. All right?"

Remus nodded. "I understand. And anything that I can do from here—"

"I'll let you know." Arthur caught Ron's eyes, smiled, and his head disappeared from the fire.

Ron stood still for a moment, staring at the fireplace, trying to absorb the events of the morning. He glanced at Hermione to gauge her reaction. She was looking very seriously into the fire, her shoulders hunched with worry—and though he was feeling pretty serious himself, Ron felt a sudden need to lighten her mood. Regardless of what was going on, it was summer, and they were together. There had been enough pressure this morning. If his father wanted them to get outside and enjoy themselves for a day...well then, he wasn't going to argue.

He reached out and took Hermione's hand, pulling her a bit closer to him, to break her concentration. "Let's get outside then, shall we?" he asked quietly.

She started and looked up at him, then smiled. "Yes, all right."

"What d'you want to do?"

"Well..." Hermione ducked her head. "Actually, I'd hoped to study up for the Apparition Examinations. They're next week, and we have to be ready."

"Oh, come on—that's nothing, is it?" Ron asked carelessly. "We can just look over the manual in a few days."

"You'd better study. I don't want you getting splinched, or—"

"Hermione, I'm not going to get splinched!"

She shrugged. "I'm just saying you'd do better to study, that's all."

Ron pulled her a bit closer, determined to steer her mind away from tests, or any other serious issue. He leaned his forehead to hers and spoke softly. "It's the first day of summer. Don't you dare say you want to study for that exam, or I'll Full Body-Bind you," he threatened suggestively. "And then what would you do?"

She blushed a little. "Ron, erm..."

Ron followed Hermione's eyes over toward Remus, who was still standing quietly in the room, watching them. Ron had quite forgotten that he was there. Now, however, Remus walked past them, clearly fighting not to smile, and shook his head. Ron watched him go.

"You're terrible," Hermione whispered up at him, pulling away slightly and pushing her curls back from her face.

Ron didn't really care. He let go of her hand and threw his arm around her. "What do you want to do?" he asked her again, squeezing her shoulder. "Go through your job letters? Go down to the village and see what there is to do around here?"

"No. I really sort of *did* plan to..."

"Study?" He sighed. "You've got to be kidding me—look at the sky outside!"

She didn't look outside, though—she was still regarding him, chewing on her lip. "Well... what if we studied outside? We could pass the exams *and* get some sun. Didn't Remus say at dinner last night that there's a bit of lake around here, down that forest path in the back?"

Ron stared at her. Did she mean what he hoped she meant? "So you want to... go and... study... down by the lake?" he ventured, not daring to elaborate further.

"Well, we could bring a blanket to lie on while we... study. And then we could always swim if we got sick of studying—couldn't we?"

She wasn't looking at him now. She had fixed her eyes on her fingernails, which must suddenly have grown exceptionally interesting. Ron could hardly believe his luck.

"Yeah," he answered, trying to keep his voice even. "Yeah, we could—do that. All right, then you, er—go get the book and your towel, and, you know, whatever else you need—"

"Mostly I think I'll need a swimsuit."

"Ah." Ron felt his ears go pink. "Right. And I'll go up and—well, just—I'll meet you back down here in five minutes, shall I?"

Hermione turned to him and kissed him before he could think about it. "Five minutes, then," she said, a bit breathlessly, before she raced off down the hall and up the stairs, with Ron following close behind, still in semi-shock. For once, he thought, studying for an exam might actually be seriously enjoyable.

* * * * *

Ginny sat cross-legged on the grass at the end of the road, picking at the worn knee of her jeans. Hermione had given them to her last summer; they were now her favorite trousers and she planned to wear them out. She didn't care if they were all supposed to wear robes and hats, and be grown-ups about it now that Hogwarts was over with. She wanted to wear Muggle things. It was summer, after all, and sleeveless tops were much more comfortable than heavy long-sleeved robes—that was, at least, when the sun was bothering to shine.

It was shining hotly enough today. Ginny squinted up against it and saw a small shadow flying back and forth in the sun's glare. Harry, on his Firebolt. She knew he still loved that Firebolt. And, like Remus had said, Harry was out here now using the Firebolt to burn it off—he was burning off the tension of seven years spent waiting to be killed, burning off the guilt he felt over the people who had lost their lives, when he hadn't.

It would definitely take time.

Time was all right, though, Ginny reflected, stretching out on her back and shutting her eyes. She had time. Plenty of it. A whole year stretched ahead of her, unplanned and unknown. There wouldn't be a final year at Hogwarts, for her. Thanks to the destruction caused on the last day of war, that seventh year, which should have been her finest, had been stolen. But she hadn't been lying to Harry earlier; she really didn't feel horrible about it. It was only school, after all. She had lost worse. She had lost a brother, in the war.

Percy was never coming back. It was still extremely difficult to believe, and Ginny didn't know if it would ever really hit her. She repeated it to herself, sometimes—*Percy's dead. Percy's dead.* She waited for it to make her cry, or break her down. But it had never hit her all the way through—not even at the memorial service, which had been so beautiful and sad. She'd cried there, but only very briefly. She couldn't get rid of the strange, stupid belief that Percy was just on holiday, that he would be home at Christmas, that there were still seven of them. She wondered how Penelope was doing. Penelope, she was quite sure, had felt the hit right away. She had looked a wreck at the memorial service. She opened her eyes quickly, blinking against the sun, and counted herself lucky that Harry was alive.

Ginny had used to wonder what she would do if something ever happened to Harry, during the course of all the fighting. She'd sat in her dormitory in Gryffindor on a hundred nights, calmly telling herself that, although everything was being done to prevent his death, of course, the truth was that Harry was in terrible danger—worse than anyone else's. And then, at the idea of a world without any Harry in it, Ginny had used to break down crying into her pillow. Just at the idea.

Hermione's request, in April, had come as a relief. A surprise, and a relief. Ginny had so wanted to do *something* for Harry, and Expecto Sacrificum had finally given her that opportunity.

"I need to ask you something. It's about Harry."

Ginny remembered how she had sat up instantly, defensively, expecting to be questioned about her private feelings. But that hadn't been Hermione's objective at all.

"I don't even know how to ask you this. There's a spell. Well, there isn't one yet, but we're going to build it, in Harry. I've been doing research, and in terms of Arithmancy... well, you know the way that spells have their elements. I'm basing this one on the Patronus, and as far as I can tell, for it to really work, we're going to need four corners. Four elements. Am I making any sense?"

Ginny had shaken her head. For once, Hermione hadn't been making much sense at all, but it hadn't mattered. Whatever it was, Ginny had known it was necessary—she'd leaned forward intently.

"Go on."

"It's a... sacrifice spell. Everyone involved will provide the elements of the sacrifice—like Ron and me. We're giving Harry the first corner; that's friendship. The second corner comes from a mentor—it probably would have been Dumbledore if he were alive, but Professor Lupin is going to do it. And then we needed a guardian—that's Sirius, of course."

Hermione had hesitated, then, and Ginny had held her breath, waiting.

"And the fourth element is true love. But Ginny, think about this before you answer—I want you to know what you're agreeing to—"

"Yes. I'll do that."

There had been no pause, no question in her mind. Hermione seemed to have expected this; she had taken Ginny's hand and looked at her gravely.

"You might be giving your life."

"That doesn't matter." She paused. "Does Harry know you're asking me to do this?"

"Yes he does."

"And he said that I could...?"

"Ginny." Hermione had pressed her hand gently. "Who else could it possibly be?"

Ginny looked back into the sky now, and watched Harry take a steep, reckless dive that might have thrown a professional flier off his broom. But Harry merely pulled out of it at the last second, climbed into the sky again in spirals, and dove once more. He didn't even know that she was sitting there watching him.

Yes. Who else could it possibly have been? They'd come to her to complete that spell because her love had never been a hidden thing. Ginny gave a resentful little laugh. It might as well have been hidden. Harry was about as vocal now as he'd been all those times that he'd stayed with them at the Burrow. He talked to her, he was always polite and considerate—or at least, he had been back then. But he refused to open up to her—refused to give her any indication that he knew and accepted how she felt. She'd hoped that his allowing her to participate in the spell had meant something. He'd known what she was there for.

Ginny rolled over on her stomach and stared at the grass. She didn't want to look at Harry, for the moment. Perhaps it had only been a week since the end of the war, and perhaps she should keep being patient. But she couldn't help questioning *why* it was that she still followed wherever he went, and she couldn't help despising herself a little bit for it. Perhaps she should have gone home to the Burrow to be with her mother. It was useless trying to hash through anything with Harry right now. But she knew, somehow, that he was aware of her presence. He needed her company—he wanted her there—she didn't know how she knew it, but she did. It was as clear to her as anything he could have said out loud. If it hadn't been clear, she wouldn't have followed him. It was terribly painful to watch him going through all this.

But if he needed her, she wouldn't go anywhere. That was certain.

It was three hours at least before Harry landed and walked toward her. He didn't seem to notice how long it had been, and frankly, Ginny didn't mind three hours of sun after the last year of war—all the hiding and secrecy and fear had driven everyone indoors and she had missed the light and air. Although, she thought, looking at her uncovered arms, they might have freckled terribly by now. She was too fair for three unprotected hours of midsummer sunshine.

She looked up from her arms as a shadow fell over the place where she sat. Harry was standing there, sweating, exhausted, his hair everywhere, gripping his broom. He didn't say anything.

"I think it's probably lunch time," Ginny murmured, not wanting to make him talk if he didn't want to.

Harry nodded.

"Well," she went on, "I think I might walk back up the road, then—we can eat lunch at Remus's, or go into the village to see what there is. Any preference?"

Harry shrugged.

Ginny tried to smile at him. "Let's just go back then, and see what happens."

Harry nodded again. Ginny pushed herself off the ground and stood next to him, wondering how long Harry would be able to go without saying a single word. If his present mood was any indicator, it would probably be a good, long time before he spoke. He wanted to speak in gestures? That was fine. Ginny didn't mind walking with Harry in silence.

They were halfway up the road, when Ginny realized, out of the corner of her eye, that he was looking at her. She glanced at him, but said nothing. For awhile longer, they walked in silence, and then, to her surprise, Harry broke it.

"Your arms are burnt."

Ginny shivered, in the June heat. Why did everything he said make such a difference to her? She'd never understand it.

"Yes, I'm sure they're burnt. My nose, too, probably, and I'll bet all my freckles have come out."

"Your nose is fine."

Ginny couldn't help but be pleased at that. "Still, I should get a hat," she said. "We're going to be outside in the sun a lot, I hope, this summer."

"I have a hat you can wear. I'll bring it down at lunch."

Her stomach tightened. "Thanks."

They walked back to Lupin Lodge, and Harry went off upstairs to shower, leaving Ginny to sit in the living room and wait. She did so willingly, as usual, feeling the bridge of her nose carefully to see if it really was burned or not. She was touched that Harry wanted to give her his hat, but, she reminded herself, she had to try not to let it mean too much to her. She crossed her legs on the sofa and picked at the knees of her jeans again, pulling out the little, frayed, white threads almost meditatively as she listened to the shower run, upstairs.

She would never understand how she could love Harry as much as she did, with as little as she

had to go on.

A/N: Thank you to everyone who has given constructive criticism thus far. And thank you especially to Cap'n Kathy aka Elanor Gamgee, who sat over our shoulders this Memorial Day Weekend and gave as much input on this chapter as either of us.

— CHAPTER FOUR —

Meet the Press

Harry shielded his eyes from the blinding sun and looked over Hermione's shoulder at the book that she was reading. The first week of summer had passed peacefully, and the peace was very strange. Harry was doing his best to enjoy it, but the quiet was difficult for him. He was used to action—to chaos and quick thinking and high risk. Now that there was little more to do than study and enjoy the sunlight, it left far too much time for dwelling on the past. Without the urgency of war to occupy him, Harry felt something dark and buried beginning to surface at the back of his brain. And whatever it was, it was too painful to acknowledge.

He wasn't really sure what he had expected out of the summer. He hadn't had time to think or dream about it at all in the last days of the war, and now that it had arrived, he knew he ought to be content. Lupin Lodge was cozy and comfortable, and his friends had decided to stay together this summer. And they were all *alive*, Harry reflected, still stunned by that fact. He knew he ought to be nothing but grateful, just for that.

Still, he couldn't help a nagging feeling of resentment on one score. For four years, Harry had wished for the freedom to live with his godfather—they'd both been looking forward to it—and now Sirius was hardly around. The Dementor problems at Azkaban had been keeping Sirius away until late in the evenings, and even when he did come home, Harry could see stress and fatigue in his godfather's face. In light of the grave issues that Sirius worked with each day, Harry felt foolish telling Sirius about his own days spent practicing moves on the Firebolt. And yet, he didn't really want to hear what was going on with the Dementors. A part of him knew that he *should* care, but that wooden, stifled feeling would take over, and he'd tell himself that he really wasn't interested. It left very little room for conversation.

As a result, he was more than willing to study for the Apparition test. At least it was something else to focus on, and though he'd already studied for it far more than was necessary, he had still said yes this morning when Hermione had asked him if he'd wanted to join her outside to go over the manual. Now it was mid-afternoon, and he and Ron had been sitting in the front garden of Lupin Lodge for well over two hours, listening to Hermione read aloud from *I'll Be Right There: Apparition Theory and Practice*. The drowsy warmth of the day reminded Harry a little of their Divination classroom, and the sight of Ron, who appeared to be falling asleep, made this comparison even stronger. Ron's body was stretched out along the blanket and his head lolled gently to one side.

"So," Hermione summed up loudly, "according to the manual, when it comes to distance, concentration is the most important thing and knowing your exact arrival point is crucial." She gave her book a studious little tap with her wand. "It sounds simple, but that doesn't mean it's easy. The test is going to start out at the Department of Apparition Licensing, with the written portion. If we pass that, they'll have us Apparate to a point here in England. Then, when we've proven we can manage it, we'll be asked to cross a body of water. And they won't be giving us a hint beforehand as to where we'll be asked to go, so we're really being tested on our knowledge of geography as well."

Instead of looking daunted at the idea of a double exam, Hermione gave Harry a smile. "That should be fun," she said. "We might get to go anywhere—even if it is only for a few minutes. It could be any city that has a D.A.L.: in America, or Australia, or Austria, or Belgium—"

"Are you going to list all the countries for us by alphabet?" Ron interrupted, not opening his eyes. "I hope you are. Because I'd much rather study for another two hours than do oh, say, *anything* else."

Hermione stopped listing countries, but she shot a look at Ron. "I thought *you* were asleep."

"Hard to sleep, isn't it, with you being so fascinating. Tell her, Harry."

But Harry wasn't about to say anything. He watched Hermione roll her eyes at Ron, watched Ron roll over on his stomach and lay his head unconcernedly on his arms, and only felt sorry that

he wasn't able to laugh at them. It should have been funny. But nothing had struck him as all that funny, this week, and Harry was starting to get angry with himself for his indifference. These were his *friends*. This was supposed to be a *good* summer, and all the trouble was supposed to be over. Harry knew that Voldemort's recent defeat should have left him feeling triumphant. Elated. But instead, it had left him feeling unsettled and vaguely numb, and Harry had no idea how to shake off his strange listlessness.

He didn't want to think about it. He wouldn't think about it. He took the book from which Hermione had been reading, opened it randomly, and began to turn the pages without not really looking at them.

Hermione turned to him attentively at once. "Do you need to clarify something, Harry? Can I help you with anything specific?"

Ron snickered loudly, causing Hermione's eyes to narrow. Harry looked from one to the other of them, wondering whether it was his imagination, or if their bickering today was slightly sharper than it had been in awhile. Ron and Hermione had never stopped fighting each other, but in the last two years or so, their arguments had taken on an obviously affectionate undercurrent. That undercurrent seemed to be missing today.

Hermione chose not to respond to Ron, and merely looked expectantly at Harry. "Question?" she asked briskly.

Harry shrugged and shook his head automatically. He'd been avoiding giving answers to anything lately, if he could help it. But, at the sight of the slightly disappointed look on Hermione's face, Harry sighed, searched the page he was on, and made an effort to come up with something for her to think about.

"I don't see how we can leave England while we're testing," he said, after a moment. "They can't have us Apparating to other countries without stopping first at the borders. I thought we were barred."

Hermione tilted her head, looking happily thoughtful. "Hmm. We *are* barred, usually, because it's impossible to Apparate freely across borders... and after the exam, I'm certain that we'll always have to stop at wizard customs, if we're traveling internationally, because if you run into an international border, well then you automatically splinch because there's no way through. You just smack right up against the shield—it's been known to cause fatalities. But I think that, during our exam, there are special circumstances. They probably just let the shield down in a targeted area. And then we can just show up in whichever D.A.L. they send us to, the staff at the other end will mark our safe arrival, and we'll come straight home."

Ron rolled over on his back again, shielded his eyes, and looked at Hermione. "Unless you *miss* your targeted area and get splinched. In which case, half of you might end up somewhere really interesting, instead of all of you ending up bored stiff in the D.A.L."

Harry frowned a little. He felt quite certain that after everything the three of them had been through, they could manage simple Apparition. "None of us is going to get splinched," he said flatly.

Hermione nodded agreeably. "No, I can't imagine that we would."

"Unless we try Apparating somewhere off-limits, like Hogwarts," Ron grinned, clearly very satisfied with himself. "Aha. Finally I get that one right."

"Actually *no*," said Hermione swiftly, "you're wrong. The enchantments at Hogwarts have mostly been destroyed. They were ruined at graduation—all that Dark magic in one place...." She paused, glanced at Harry, and went on in a lighter voice. "Anyway, Professor McGonagall was telling me right before we were leaving that part of the reason Hogwarts is closed for a year is that it's going to take that long to set up all of the protective magic again. So if you'd like to Apparate onto the Hogwarts grounds, Ron," she continued loftily, "now's your chance."

"Our local Apparition expert," Ron muttered. "Can't wait to see you at the D.A.L.—you know, *that's* where you ought to put in another job application. They'd give you a bloody job offer on the spot."

Hermione's chin came down out of the air and she looked at him. Harry noticed that she was not at all amused, and she wasn't pretending this time for the sake of provoking Ron. Her expression was honestly hurt.

"Yesterday you said that I don't *need* any more bloody job offers," she said quietly. "I thought I was supposed to give it a rest with the letters, and the owls, and the whole business."

Ron sat bolt upright, immediately serious. The sarcasm was wiped from his face. "Hey. Hey. I was joking when I said that."

"It didn't sound that way."

Ron reached toward Hermione, but after glancing quickly at Harry, he retracted his hand and cleared his throat. Harry looked between them, knowing that he'd missed something. He was, how-

ever, keen enough to fill in the blank for himself. In the week that they had been living with Sirius and Remus, Hermione had received another eleven owls, bringing her total to twenty-six replies out of twenty-seven applications. All of them had been letters of glowing praise and acceptance, which had pleased Hermione to no end. Ron, on the other hand, had grown slightly less enthusiastic with every passing owl, and Harry guessed that this was due to fear that Hermione would leave. Most of the positions that Hermione was being offered would require her to Apparate long distances, work long hours, stay away frequently, or even travel out of the country for long stretches of time. And judging from the way that Ron was looking at her now, Harry felt quite sure that his friend didn't want Hermione going anywhere.

Harry looked away. Ron and Hermione's relationship didn't make him uncomfortable—he'd got over the awkwardness of knowing that his two best friends were together romantically—but he had no desire to witness their private moments. The expression on Ron's face most definitely qualified as private; it was only for Hermione, who was looking back at Ron in much the same way.

To distract himself, Harry allowed his own eyes to wander up the road, settling his gaze on an enormous house—the only one of its size he'd seen in Stagsden. On its grand, third-story deck a heavysset man was preparing to sun himself, obviously enjoying his summer. His blond hair glinted, as did his pale skin, and Harry was reminded of what Dudley looked like in trunks. The idea almost made him crack a smile—partly because of the image, and partly because it was such a relief to be rid of the Dursleys forever. He never had to see his aunt and uncle again, if he didn't want to, and that fact was amazing to him. The protective magic at number four, Privet Drive, was no longer necessary to Harry now that Voldemort was gone—and though another person might have felt ungrateful for leaving his guardians behind him without a second glance, Harry knew that the Dursleys were perfectly happy to see him go.

Feeling cheered, somewhat, Harry turned his eyes from the man on the deck, and looked back at his friends, thinking that he wouldn't mind going down to the lake to get some sun, himself. He'd spent the whole week on his Firebolt and thought that swimming might make a nice change of pace—after all, Ron and Hermione always came back from their swims looking happy enough.

Harry smirked, slightly, and leaned back on his elbows, watching them. They weren't fighting now. Ron had Hermione's bare feet in his lap and she quizzed him from the practice test at the back of *I'll Be Right There*, while he played idly with her toes. Harry thought he might just get up and go to the lake without them while they were distracted. He didn't mind going down to swim alone—it didn't matter. He was finished studying. He put his palms down on the blanket to push off from the ground.

"How's it going, you three?"

A cool shadow fell over Harry. He looked up, felt his face grow hot, and only hoped that he was sun-browned enough by now that it was unnoticeable. Ginny stood there in a bright blue swimsuit and a pair of shorts, with sandals on her feet and her hands on her hips. She wore the cap that he had lent her the week before, and her hair glinted in its ponytail, which was pulled through the gap in the back. On her face there was an expression of mock-horror.

"Don't tell me you're *still* studying?" she demanded, looking around at them. "It's been hours! You'll all pass! Doesn't *anyone* want to stop and go down to the lake?"

Her swimsuit was modest—Harry knew that—but it didn't matter. He had never seen anything fit Ginny so well. It was extremely difficult to keep his eyes focused on her face.

"No thanks," he mumbled quickly, fumbling for words. "I think we've got—more to read through, first."

The moment that the words were out of his mouth, he kicked himself inwardly. He *did* want to go down to the lake. It shouldn't stop him that there were swimsuits involved. But if there was one clear thought that had managed to penetrate the haze around his brain in the past two weeks, it was that Ginny Weasley's presence made him feel very alert and extremely awkward, and it bothered him enormously.

He'd known about her girlhood crush. It hadn't been a secret; her brothers had told him about it the first day he'd gone to the Burrow, and Ginny had proved it by being quite clearly taken with him. But as the years had passed at Hogwarts, Ginny's feelings for him had seemed to turn to friendship. Because of her closeness to Hermione, she had spent more time with the three of them in their latter years at school. She'd stopped blushing every time that Harry walked into the common room, and she'd started chatting to him normally at intervals, and he had assumed it meant that her infatuation with him was gone.

It had been at once a relief to think this... and a disappointment. He couldn't deny that his stomach felt a bit funny once and again when Ginny smiled. But he hadn't been about to get close to anyone in the way that Ron was close to Hermione. He remembered with perfect distinctness the

look on Cho Chang's face when Cedric Diggory had been killed, and whether consciously or not, he had decided not to leave anyone looking like that. So, when Ginny had stopped offering him her attention in that way, he hadn't sought it out again. He'd let it go.

Expecto Sacrificum had come as a terrible shock. When Hermione had told him what the spell would require, Harry had laughed outright. The fourth corner had to be true love? It sounded like something out of one of Lavender Brown's spellbooks. He remembered his reaction perfectly.

"Well we can't do it then, can we? There isn't anybody for that element!"

Hermione had paused, and glanced at Ron. Clearly, there was something that the two of them had already discussed, and Harry remembered a feeling of severe irritation that whatever it was, it must concern him, and yet they hadn't told him. He'd demanded to know what was happening, and Hermione had finally broken it to him.

"Harry... there is somebody for that element. But I don't even want to ask her to do this until I know how you feel about it because I... I'm almost positive she'll say yes."

He'd jumped. There *was* somebody? He'd stared from Hermione's carefully calm expression to Ron's extremely sober face, and felt his throat tightening as his mind offered the only possible answer. There was only one person who had ever felt that way about him that he knew of. But no—it couldn't really be... because she didn't *still*...

Harry had looked to Ron, forcing himself to ask the question very faintly.

"Who?"

Ron's reply had been equally faint.

"It's my sister."

Harry had gone still for a moment, and then he'd let out a dry, incredulous laugh. Ginny still liked him. More than that. According to Hermione, she *loved* him—and Hermione knew it was true, because Ginny had confessed it to her. Harry had felt a bolt of something powerful shoot through his veins, followed closely by a thud of cold dread in his gut. He had to say no—he couldn't let her do it. It was bad enough that he was allowing Hermione and Ron to do this thing. Bad enough that Sirius and Remus had to be risked for it. How could he possibly let Ginny risk her life for him—especially when he didn't know what he felt about her? He'd felt incredibly guilty even asking the question.

"And do I... have to... feel the same? For this to work?"

Ron had swallowed hard and looked away. Hermione had sighed, a bit wearily.

"No, Harry," she said quietly. "You don't have to feel anything."

Still, Harry hadn't moved to answer. Hermione had sensed his unwillingness to invite Ginny into the spell, and she had slowly coaxed him toward the idea. It was the closest they had come to approaching Voldemort's defeat, and if the spell could be built, then it *had* to be. It was for the good of everyone. And Ginny would never forgive herself if she found out that there had been a way to do it, and that they had missed this chance because of her.

So he had said yes. And Ginny had said yes. And the following morning at breakfast he had sought her gaze down the Gryffindor table, and she had turned and faced him without blinking, as if to say that there was no point in hiding her feelings, now that he knew about them again. Something strange and powerful had gone crashing through Harry, looking at her. It was... enormous. It made no sense. *Why* did she love him? What had *he* done to deserve it? And what in hell was he supposed to do about it, now that he—and *everybody*—knew?

These were still his questions, and he struggled with them every time she spoke to him. He knew he ought to say something—anything—to address what she had done. She had risked her life for him, and not just in theory. She had really done it. In the final struggle, moments before Harry had brought down Voldemort with the force of Expecto Sacrificum, Ginny had stepped in the way of a curse to block his back from Lucius Malfoy, and she had very nearly lost her life because of it. She deserved at the very *least* to have Harry acknowledge what she had risked.

But he couldn't.

And in the two months since Hermione had asked her to take part in the spell, Ginny had never once spoken of what she had done. She'd never mentioned the way she'd protected him. And though she was often with him, watching him, she didn't seem to be suffering from any of the same inner turmoil that he felt. Even now, as she stood looking down at him, there was a bit of amusement showing on her face. He struggled to excuse himself from going down for a swim, and Ginny only shrugged at his response.

"All right, then, if you're all going to be boring." Ginny grinned at him. Harry felt his stomach lurch, a little. "See you at dinner." She turned away and went toward the left of the cottage, and though Harry wished he could think of a way to call her back, he knew he wasn't going to.

He was relieved when she stopped walking, of her own accord. She had nearly disappeared around the house when something seemed to stop her. She froze, pivoted, and peered down the road as if she heard something approaching. Harry watched as she narrowed her eyes for a moment and then clapped one hand to her mouth in obvious surprise.

"What?" he asked, wary at once, putting his hand to his wand. "What is it?" He turned to the road, and Ron and Hermione's heads followed, swiveling to stare at whatever it was that Ginny was seeing.

"Isn't that—yes, it is!" Ginny cried. She ran back to the blanket and pointed down the road excitedly. "It's Colin!" she exclaimed, her face lighting up.

Harry, Ron and Hermione followed Ginny's finger, all their necks craning to see what she was talking about. And to Harry's surprise, she was right—Colin Creevey approached Lupin Lodge, hoisting a large, black bag over his shoulder, waving broadly and grinning at them.

"Hi, Harry!" he hollered out. "Ginny! Ron, Hermione—hi!"

Harry hardly had time to wonder how on earth Ginny had known that someone was coming before she had bolted down the road to embrace her old classmate, whom none of them had seen in over two years.

Colin had been in school with them only through the end of his fourth year. Voldemort's surprise attack on Hogwarts at the very end of Harry's fifth year had ended not only in the death of Albus Dumbledore, but also in the murder of Colin's younger brother, Dennis. Colin's Muggle parents had not allowed him to return to Hogwarts, or even to communicate freely with his school friends—and Colin's parents were not the only ones. Even Hermione had had to beg and threaten to be allowed to stay in school, and Hogwarts had seemed very empty the following year, for, despite Professor McGonagall's assurances the grounds were more secure than they had ever been, many families had chosen to keep their children with them at home.

There were many students that they'd never seen again, and Harry expected that some of them had accustomed themselves to living in the Muggle world, without their magic. Harry had certainly never expected to see Colin Creevey again, and he got to his feet at once with Ron and Hermione to greet their fellow Gryffindor. All of them stood watching, listening to Colin, who chatted enthusiastically with Ginny as they came close enough to be heard.

"I didn't know you were living here, too, Ginny—that's great!"

"All four of us, and it *is* great, it's wonderful."

"I'll bet."

"But where are *you* living? And are you doing magic again, or are you living as a Muggle? And what are you doing here?" Ginny asked, all her questions coming out in a breathless rush. Harry found he couldn't help but smile. It had taken him a long time to see the truth in Ron's avowal that Ginny 'never shut up', because Ginny had been so shy with him at first. But in recent years, she'd proven Ron perfectly right. She could talk with the best of them.

"I'm in London right now, I'm doing magic again, and I'm here on an assignment." Colin answered, pegging all her questions in one go, and laughing as he did so.

"An assignment! What for? Oh, Colin, it *is* good to see you."

Colin walked up to the edge of the blanket, looking much older than Harry remembered him. It had never occurred to him that Colin would grow up along with the rest of them, but it was impossible to ignore the differences in him now. Colin was taller and broader, and his posture was infinitely more relaxed. He was also looking sideways at Ginny with obvious appreciation.

Harry offered his hand at once, forcing Colin to extract his arm from Ginny's in order to take it.

"Hi, Harry." Even Colin's voice was different—graver. It didn't have any of the old hero-worship left in it, and Harry liked it much better that way. Colin shook his hand firmly and smiled. "It's good to see you."

"You, too." Harry found that he really meant it. It *was* good to see Colin. So many people had died or disappeared—it was a comfort to put a finger on the ones who were alive and well.

Colin hugged Hermione next, causing Ron to step between them and offer his hand as quickly as he could. Harry held back a snort. It was somehow amusing. He never would have imagined little Colin Creevey causing such a reaction. But when Colin stepped back again to run a hand through his hair and smile at them, Harry realized that the reaction was wholly deserved. Colin really had changed.

"Did you say that you're in London?" Hermione asked, once Colin had dropped his bag and stretched a little bit.

"Yep. I was just telling Ginny. I moved back into the wizarding world as soon as I heard that Hogwarts was closed, and tried to get a job in Diagon Alley."

"Why'd you wait until Hogwarts closed?" Ron asked.

Colin grinned again. "Well, I never graduated, did I? And I couldn't do magic outside school. So I had to wait either until I turned seventeen, or until there wasn't any school left to get me in trouble. Both happened at about the same time."

Hermione laughed. "Did you find a job, then?"

"At the *Daily Prophet*. Can you believe they hired me?" He smiled proudly. "And without a diploma or anything. But... well, I had to do a number to convince them. Don't get upset, Harry, but I told them that I know you." He looked a bit sheepish. "They all know how private you like to keep yourself. I think they figured an old schoolmate might stand a better chance of snapping your photograph."

Harry took an instinctive step away from Colin, his smile fading rapidly. "You're here to take my photograph?" he asked, his voice going hard at once. He looked down at Colin's black bag, realizing it must hold a camera. "Why? What is it?"

"Why?" Colin laughed. "Surely you've heard by now that you're famous, Harry. Come on, I know you must be sick of it, but it's the end of the war and everyone wants to hear about what you're doing, now that you've saved the world."

Harry flinched; Colin's light tone put him even more on edge, especially since Colin was now leaning down to open up his camera-bag. Colin's last comment bothered him. He supposed he should be used to it, but he felt slightly annoyed. After all, he hadn't saved the world all by himself; it had been all of them. Harry looked quickly to Ron and Hermione for support. Colin's comment seemed to have drifted right past them, but they were watching Harry intently, clearly waiting for him to do what he normally did and refuse, point-blank, to submit to an interview.

Harry was about to do just that when he was distracted by a 'pop' at the edge of the garden and the arrival of a young witch in dark pink robes. She carried a roll of parchment and a quill, glanced across the garden a bit nervously and smiled at Colin, smoothing her blond curls carefully into place. She was obviously the reporter.

She also happened to be stunning. Her robes set off the flush in her cheeks and her face and figure were like something out of a Gladrags advertisement. Harry couldn't help staring at her for a moment and Ron gaped as well, his eyebrows up and his jaw dropping slightly even though Hermione was standing right beside him.

Hermione didn't seem to notice that Ron was engrossed—she peered at the witch for a moment herself until a look of sudden recognition crossed her face. She then turned to Ron quickly, catching his expression, but to Harry's surprise, this didn't seem to bother her in the least. In fact, Hermione gave a positively wicked smile.

She crossed the lawn, reached her arms out to the lovely young reporter and embraced her. Harry couldn't understand why, until Hermione began to speak, quite clearly enough for everyone to hear her. "Eloise! Eloise *Midgen*, it's been a whole year, how *wonderful* to see you!"

Now Ron's mouth fell open entirely. Hermione turned and came back toward him, bringing Eloise along with her. Eloise's smile was still tentative, but Hermione grinned at Ron as though Christmas had come early. "Ron, *you* remember Eloise, I'm sure. *Do* say hello."

Ron nodded stupidly, stuck out his hand and managed, "Well. Hi there."

"Hi," she replied shyly, looking over at Colin again, who nodded at her in an encouraging manner. "Hi, Ron. And, Harry?" She put out her hand to him and Harry shook it.

"Hi, Eloise," he said, suppressing a laugh at Ron, who was still open-mouthed in shock. Beside him, Hermione was in an ecstasy of entertained satisfaction.

"Eloise is working for the *Prophet* too," Colin explained. "She'll be asking you a few questions, all right Harry?" Colin deftly hefted his camera into position and stood behind Eloise.

She, however, was still looking hesitant.

"I'm afraid I'm rather new at this, Harry—I'm sure you'd rather talk to somebody else. They only sent me because I was at Hogwarts with you; the editors seem to think it will make a difference if—"

Colin put a hand on her shoulder. "I already told him about that, El. It's fine. Go on, ask your questions."

"Well, they're not really *my* questions. I mean, I didn't write them."

"That's all right, they're still yours."

Eloise sighed anxiously. "I'm not doing very well with this, am I?"

"Yes you are. Go ahead."

Harry had to smile a little at their exchange. They certainly didn't behave like any of the reporters he'd come across so far and he was surprised to find himself feeling rather generous toward them, considering how much he'd come to hate attention from the press. "I'm not very good at this myself," he admitted, truthfully.

Eloise looked back at him. "Then you don't mind if I ask questions?"

Colin sighed, smiling at her. "Even if he minds," he said, in a patient undertone, "you have to ask. It's the assignment."

"It seems so rude."

"Yes, well... you're a reporter."

Harry laughed slightly at that and decided it couldn't hurt to let the interview take place. After all, it was only Colin and Eloise, who were obviously harmless.

"Ask away," he said recklessly, ignoring the stares of disbelief that both Ron and Hermione were directing toward him.

Eloise smiled prettily. "Thanks, Harry. All right, then," she said, checking her parchment and poisoning her quill. "First question—"

"Is that a Quick Quotes Quill?" asked Ginny suddenly. She had stepped up beside Harry and was pointing to the quill, suspicion written across her face.

"Oh, no!" Eloise shook her curls. "It's just Self-Inking. Is that all right?"

Ginny considered for a moment, then nodded—but did not step back again. She stayed right next to Harry, her arms crossed over her swimsuit, listening intently. Harry glanced sideways at her.

"Right," Eloise continued. "First question. What do you plan to do, now that You-Know-Who has been defeated?"

"Voldemort," Colin corrected.

Eloise gulped. "Yes—sorry. I'm not used to that. All right—what do you plan to do, now that Voldemort has been defeated? Any job offers, Harry? Career ideas?"

Harry thought, uncomfortably, of the job offer that he had received from the Aurors. If he lied to Eloise about that, Moody would read the paper and know it. On the other hand, if he told the truth, Eloise would surely want to know exactly why Harry had turned down such a significant offer, and Harry didn't think he could bear to get into it. Normally he would have shut the interview down right then, but knowing Colin and Eloise from their time together at Hogwarts made that difficult. He hated to be outwardly rude to them; he felt a slight panic begin to rise up, as he always did with reporters, and began to gesture awkwardly.

"Well—I don't—"

He stopped. Ginny had touched him lightly on his side with her fingertips—a quick shock bolted through his center.

"You haven't made any decisions about your future," she guided, quietly.

Harry blinked. That was a good answer. "That's true," he said, turning back to Eloise. "I haven't made any definite plans yet. It's all up in the air."

Colin grinned. "Well, Harry. You've got yourself a press representative," he said, snapping a picture of Harry and Ginny, side by side. Ginny winced visibly and Harry felt queasy, wishing he'd never agreed to this in the first place.

"Up... in the... air..." Eloise muttered, writing furiously. "Oh! Speaking of up in the air, Harry, are you planning to try playing Seeker again?"

Harry started slightly. "What—you mean, professionally?"

Colin clapped Eloise lightly on the back. "Good one," he praised. She flushed a little, which made her even prettier, but Harry hardly noticed. She had just filled his head with visions of professional Quidditch—something he had hardly dared to dream about in the past few years. It had seemed so unlikely, so far away, that he would get to try out for England's teams.

"Play Seeker," he repeated, realizing as he spoke that he liked the idea. "Actually, I'd hardly thought about it," he said, honestly.

"But you will, now?" Eloise urged.

Harry shrugged. It wasn't entirely out of the question. Hadn't everyone told him that he was

even better than Charlie? And Charlie was supposed to have been good enough to play for England. "Maybe," he offered, noncommittally. "I don't know."

"Well, there hasn't been a lot of time for you to think about your career, I imagine," said Eloise fairly, poising her quill again and checking her pad. "Which leads me to question two, actually. Did you always believe that you had a future to plan for, or are you surprised to have survived at all?"

Harry felt his stomach go ice-cold at the question. Beside him, Ginny drew in a sharp breath of protest.

"Next question," she said, her voice low and even.

"Oh, come on, Ginny, that's not so unreasonable—none of us knew if we were going to survive—" Colin began, but Ginny cut him off with a wave of her hand.

"Actually, Eloise, let me see your scroll and quill a minute. I can save you time."

Startled, Eloise held them out to Ginny, who took them and scanned down the list. She made a small sound of impatient anger, and began to cross out questions one after another. Harry watched over her shoulder as she eliminated, "Do you feel your parents are still with you in spirit?" "What is your most difficult memory of the war?" and "Do you think that you will ever recover from your long battle with the Dark side?" Her hand trembled as she put a violent slash through "Your close friends have also suffered terrible losses. How have these affected you?" She glanced up briefly at Harry. He noticed that she hesitated for a split second before looking down again and drawing a line through, "Whom, if anyone, are you currently dating?"

Ginny looked over the roll of parchment once more and then, seemingly satisfied, handed the scroll and quill back again.

Eloise's face fell, when she saw it. "You've left me just two questions!" she objected. But Ginny was adamant—she stood staunchly next to Harry and shook her head. There was nothing for Eloise to do but sigh. "Well... all right. Question five—"

"Three," Colin pointed out quietly.

"No, no, it would have been five. I'm not allowed to ask three and four," Eloise whispered over her shoulder. She passed a hand over her hair and Harry couldn't help but notice that Colin watched her with both amusement and attraction.

"Fine," he agreed. "Five."

Eloise smiled at him and turned back to Harry. "Question five. Are you enjoying living with Sirius Black?"

Harry glanced sideways at Ginny again, and felt a rush of gratitude towards her and a pang of guilt towards Sirius. Even if the Ministry's struggle with the Dementors *had* made it impossible for him to spend much time with Sirius this week, Harry still appreciated that his godfather's name was clear, and that he was able to live with him at all. He realized suddenly that the whole situation was probably just as new and foreign to Sirius as it was to himself. He also realized that this was a question that he could actually answer.

"Yeah," he responded at once, "I am. I've actually been wanting to live with him for a long time," he added openly, feeling the beginnings of a smile. "Sirius is great."

Colin snapped a photograph while the smile still lingered on Harry's face, and Eloise scribbled furiously.

"That's fine," she said, when she'd finished. "And question eight. Where do you see yourself, in ten years' time?"

Eloise looked up expectantly. Harry frowned a little. It was an innocent enough question, but he was the last person who would know how to answer it, because the truth was that Eloise's question had hit the mark. Harry had never considered his life beyond Hogwarts. It had always seemed more than likely that he would die—every time he'd turned around for the past several years, there had seemed to be some threat or other in that direction. It had been pointless to assume a future, and painful to dwell on things that he couldn't realistically imagine coming true. But now that it was over... He was utterly at a loss. Ten years seemed a vast stretch of time.

Harry found himself looking to Ginny, perhaps because she had been able to help him with the interview so far, in the hopes that she would have some idea of what to say. But she wasn't offering answers now; she merely looked back at him, open curiosity written on her face, waiting for his reply. Not a word passed between them, but Harry thought he knew why she hadn't eliminated this question. She wanted to know if she would show up anywhere in the answer.

"I don't know," he finally said slowly, turning away from Ginny so that he wouldn't have to see her, and facing the camera once more. "I know that's not the answer you're looking for..." he continued, when Eloise's face registered some disappointment.

"Well maybe *he* doesn't know," Ron said suddenly, calling the attention of the reporters to him—

self, "but *I've* got a few ideas what he might be doing in ten years," Apparently, Ron had sufficiently recovered from goggling at Eloise—over her shoulder, he gave Harry a barely perceptible wink.

Eloise turned to Ron gratefully. "Really? And you're his best friend, isn't that right?" she said, scribbling something.

"One of them," Ron said, clapping an arm around Hermione. Colin's camera snapped in their direction and clicked twice, sending up a small cloud of purple. "Are you ready to take this down?"

Eloise nodded eagerly. "Please."

"He's going to be sitting around wasting time, living off the proceeds of his biography—which Hermione'll write—letting his kids play with his Quidditch World Cup trophy and crying in his butterbeer over the fact that nobody's interested in interviewing him anymore." Ron grinned. "Sound about right, Harry?"

Harry felt a real grin pulling at his mouth for the first time in weeks. Sometimes it still stunned him how well his friends knew him. Ron always knew when to intercede with a joke, and Harry was thankful that his friend had let him off the hook in a difficult moment.

Hermione, who was still laughing at Ron's description of the future, leaned her head on Ron's shoulder. Colin snapped another picture of the two of them. Meanwhile, Harry glanced at Ginny again. She was looking at her brother, and Harry noted with surprise that her eyes shone as if tears had sprung into them. She turned her head determinedly away from him before he could be sure, however, and Harry blinked, distracted, as the camera flashed in his direction once more.

"Yeah," Harry agreed finally, nodding slowly at Ron and then letting himself smile just slightly into the camera lens. "Yeah... that actually sounds pretty good."

There was another flash from Colin. Eloise scribbled something else, held her parchment out and looked over it, then nodded and rolled it into a scroll.

"Done?" asked Harry in relief.

"Done," Eloise replied. "I can make something of that. I'll fill it in with things I know from school—and don't worry, Harry, I won't make it horrible." She smiled kindly, and Harry believed her.

"Thanks."

"Come on, El," Colin said, fitting his camera into his bag again and swinging it over his shoulder.

"Oh no!" cried Hermione. "Are you really going already? You can't leave, we haven't seen you in so long!"

"We've hardly had a chance to catch up," Ginny chimed in, putting out her hands as if she'd stop them.

Colin nodded apologetically. "I know. I wish we could stay. I do want to catch up with everything I missed." He laughed, and there was a touch of bitterness in the sound. "Not that that's possible. But anyway, before we go..." Colin held out a hand to Ginny. "I wanted to tell you that I heard about your brother and I'm so sorry. I... I know that doesn't help. But I know what it's like, and I'm sorry it happened to you."

Harry watched as Ginny gripped Colin's hand for a moment, then let go and bowed her head slightly. "Thank you." She looked up, after a pause. "I still think about Dennis," she offered, her expression full of sympathy.

Colin bowed his head as well, then recovered and reached his hand out to Ron, who grasped it firmly in his own. "Thanks," Ron managed, a bit hoarsely.

"And your parents," Colin said quietly, offering Hermione a hand as well. She took it very briefly, but let go of it at once, then tucked herself against Ron and said nothing. Harry supposed she couldn't. Since the attack on her parents, she had never been able to talk much about them, and he hardly blamed her for her reserve. He knew better than anyone what it was like to lose both parents in the war against Voldemort, and it killed him to know that it was because she was *his* friend that her parents had suffered so badly. Harry looked away from her face, not wanting to see her expression crack. It was too painful to think about.

After a long, tense moment, Eloise let out a little sigh. "Oh, I hate to leave. It's so wonderful to see old friends. I wish we could stay, honestly. But we've got to go interview a warlock in Bristol, and..."

Colin nodded. "And we're going to be late." He shrugged. "Oh well. Most of our assignments aren't this high profile anyway. But don't worry," he laughed, and winked at Harry. "I'm sure you'll do something or other that forces them to let us bother you again. Make sure you do, all right, Harry?" He grinned, then turned to Eloise. "You're going to Apparate, and I'm going by Floo powder from the village, so if you want to stay here, you've got a half-hour before I'll be there."

"That's all right, I don't have to Apparate," Eloise said, pocketing her quill. "I'll come with you. Bye, Hermione, it's so good to see you—bye all of you—see you soon!"

They all said their good-byes, then watched Colin and Eloise disappear together down the road. The two were barely out of earshot when Hermione, her head still on Ron's shoulder, murmured, "Goodness, didn't her nose look nice."

Harry snorted. He knew exactly what Hermione was getting at. He heard Ginny snickering beside him, and realized that she must be in on the joke as well.

Ron, however, had obviously missed Hermione's point entirely. "Her *nose*?" he said in disbelief. "Forget about her nose—she's a stunner."

Hermione raised her head and looked at him mildly. "Oh?"

Ron's ears went very red. "Well—that's just, you know, an observation—"

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure." She shot a laughing glance at Harry, and then at Ginny, as she stepped away from Ron. "Well, I'm done studying. Ginny, do you still want to go to the lake?"

Ginny looked at the sky. "We still have time. Come on, let's go." She turned around slightly. "Coming, Harry?"

Harry felt his throat constrict as she looked at him. Ginny always made a point of inviting him to go with her. She always made it clear that she wanted him to be there, and she did it seemingly without a trace of embarrassment. It made it very difficult to meet her gaze.

"Maybe in a minute," he stumbled. He looked away from her to make sure that Ron wasn't observing him, but Ron was still lost in his own discomfort and noticed nothing except the back of Hermione, as she followed Ginny around the side of the cottage.

As soon as both girls were gone, Ron spun on Harry. "Why did I *say* that?" he moaned. "Hit me with a Muting Charm next time, would you?"

Harry gave a short laugh. "I don't think she cared."

Ron shook his head. "She acts like she doesn't. And then, a year later, she suddenly remembers it at the worst possible moment and it's ammunition—trust me, it happens all the time."

"Sometimes it even happens *four* years later, I imagine," Harry replied, his tone even.

"Yeah," Ron agreed, slumping like a condemned man. "She'd probably pull something like that. She's got a memory on her, that one."

"Yes." Harry had to fight to keep down his laughter—it felt good. Suddenly he was glad that Colin and Eloise had arrived so unexpectedly; even if they'd interviewed him, they'd left him in a better mood.

"I should go down there," Ron was muttering, "just follow her down there and—yeah. Yeah. Are you coming down to the lake?" Ron nodded in the direction of the house and reached down to pick up the blanket they'd been sitting on.

Harry felt himself flush. His momentary good feeling was immediately replaced with something similar to nausea as he contemplated the possible scene at the lake. He was sure that Ron would manage to redeem himself to Hermione pretty quickly, and the idea of being left with Ginny while this took place rattled him. They'd be alone together. In the water. A mental image came to Harry without being called and he tried unsuccessfully to block it.

"Actually I—wanted to try something on the Firebolt," he managed, his throat dry. "I think I'll go down to the field instead."

Ron looked at him, and Harry could have sworn that his friend's expression was suspicious. "Well... okay," Ron said, frowning slightly. "I'll see you at dinner, then?"

Harry nodded without looking in Ron's eyes, then passed him quickly and went into the house to grab his broomstick. He wasn't going to the lake. He wasn't going to sit there uncomfortably and try to think up what to say and how to act. Expecto Sacrificum had made it impossible for him to look at Ginny without feeling accountable to her. He owed her an answer that he just didn't have. If only he didn't *know* her feelings... if only she hadn't been forced into that damned spell... if only she hadn't touched his face and said "I love you" and sounded so *real*, then he wouldn't be looking at her like this. Thinking about her like this.

Would he?

Harry reached the house and ran upstairs for his Firebolt, catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror as he turned to leave the room he shared with Ron. He stopped and looked for a moment. The same untidy dark hair, same green eyes, same glasses, and when he pulled back his hair, the same lightning bolt scar. Even the mirror was usually silent on the subject. Today it had grumbled, "What *are* you wearing, dear?" and returned to silence. He wasn't anything spectacular. Even being Harry Potter wasn't anything spectacular—people ought to have been showing up out of the blue to interview Hermione and Ron. They'd ended the war as much as he had, and nobody had died because of them. People had died because of *him*. His parents. Hagrid. And the Grangers were still in St. Mungo's. Why in hell didn't Ginny see him for what he really was?

He shook his head vigorously, turned, and raced back downstairs two steps at a time, slipping silently out the door to avoid speaking to anyone. He ran hard all the way to the field at the other end of Stagsden, his breath nearly bursting in his lungs. He told himself that it was for the sake of practice; that if he was really going to consider Eloise's suggestion and go out for the English Quidditch teams, then he was going to need to get in shape—to get into the sky and brush up on Seeker technique.

In truth, he just needed to do a couple of very steep dives.

A/N: Thank you to Hallie, who has generously consented to beta-read our story for breaches of "Britishism". She never lets us say 'vacation' when what we really mean is 'holiday'.

A/N: We had to put this one at the end, so as not to spoil the surprise. But it was B Bennett who suggested that, as long as we were using dear old Eloise, we ought to make her positively stunning. Thanks, B! This chapter is dedicated to the Colin Creeveys and Eloise Midgens of the world. Everything usually does turn out all right in the end.

Ron and Hermione at the Lake

"Where's your swimsuit?" asked Ron, trying not to look disappointed as Hermione cast a shadow over him on the stoop, wearing a rose-colored T-shirt and a pair of old, brown shorts.

"Where's yours?" she retorted. Ron looked down at himself. He didn't really own a pair of swim trunks, but he had a pair of faded blue shorts that worked just as well. He'd put on his oldest shirt - a hand-me-down from Charlie with a dragon on the pocket, but he hadn't bothered to button it.

"What you see is what you get," he said, grinning mischievously. "But it seems that there's more to you than meets the eye."

"Could be," answered Hermione cheerfully, and reached out a hand to help him to his feet. After dusting himself off, he reached out to take the bag she was holding.

"Blimey!" he said, pretending to struggle under the weight of the bag. "Were not going on holiday Hermione - we're just going to the lake."

"Remus gave us a blanket," she answered loftily. "But if you don't want to use it, you don't have to. I've also packed a bottle of juice, some sunscreen, and some books on Apparition."

Ron winced. He'd thought she'd been joking about the studying. Well, what had his father said? Get a rest. That was it. And resting had everything to do with sitting next to Hermione in a bathing suit and nothing to do with studying for an exam. Still, he'd play along for now. He laced his fingers through hers and together they made their way down the path towards the lake.

* * * * *

The lake was prettily situated in the woods not far from Lupin Lodge. It was surrounded by trees, and quite shady, but the heat wave that had started the day before seemed to penetrate through the thick branches and hover in the air around them. With a flourish, Ron spread the tattered blanket, and flopped down onto it on his stomach, resting his chin on his hands in front of him and looking up at Hermione. She seated herself beside him, curling her legs under her, reached into the bag, and pulled out a copy of *I'll Be Right There: Apparition Theory and Practice*. Ron groaned.

"So, you really *are* going to study?" he asked incredulously. "Hermione, it's the first day of our holiday!"

"I know," she answered calmly, "but I'll feel better if I read at least one chapter. I can read it out loud if you like. We both need to know this. So does Harry."

Ron sighed heavily. "I'll read it all later. You go ahead." He put his forehead on his arms, closed his eyes, and lay still for a moment, listening to the sound of Hermione turning pages. It was hot out. He wanted to be in the lake. After what seemed like an eternity, Ron sat up, stretched, and pulled off shirt. He felt quite bold in doing so. Hermione had seen him shirtless before - the previous summer at the Burrow. He'd seen her in her swimsuit as well and was eager to repeat the experience. Maybe removing his own shirt would send a subliminal message her way.

"You need to be careful," Hermione said calmly, looking up from her book. "Your skin is quite fair - you'll burn. I've brought some sunscreen."

Ron looked up at the branches above. It was hot, unnaturally so, but there was no direct sunlight where they were sitting.

"Why do you want to worry with that Muggle stuff? A simple Sunblocking Charm would do the trick if I needed it," said Ron cheerfully.

"Fine," answered Hermione, returning to her book. "I just like the sunscreen because it smells nice and reminds me of summer holidays with my parents. I was going to offer to put some on your back for you if you couldn't reach it, but you seem to be getting along on your own."

Ron felt his jaw drop slightly, gears turning in his head. He didn't think he would ever quite understand Hermione, but he knew he'd never give up trying. Trying to be nonchalant, he shrugged, mumbled, "I suppose it's a bit like a potion anyway," and shifted so that his back was to her.

Hermione reached in the bag and drew out the tube, which looked a little worse for wear, as if it had seen many summers. Ron assumed that it was one of the many items that she had extracted from her parent's house the year before. He heard a 'squirt' as Hermione squeezed some of the lotion onto her hand, and then gasped as she placed the hand on his back. That Muggle stuff was quite cold.

"It'll warm up in a bit," she said, as if reading his mind. "Here, you should put some on your nose as well, or else you're going to have more than seven freckles to contend with."

Ron blushed and held out his hand to take the tube of sunscreen. She knew how many freckles he had on his nose? He'd have to double-check that in the mirror when he got home. Hermione started to rub the lotion around his back. The tube in his hand was forgotten, and he clasped his hands around his knees and closed his eyes. It was amazing how a seemingly innocent area like his back, a part of his body to which he'd never given much thought, had suddenly sprouted sensitive areas everywhere. Both of Hermione's hands were now moving in circles up and down his back, around his shoulders, and over to the backs of his upper arms. Ron rested his head on his knees contentedly, and Hermione abruptly stopped, patted him lightly with the tips of her fingers and said airily, "Right, you're all done."

"What about you?" Ron asked, turning his head to look at her. She hadn't removed that T-shirt or her shorts yet. "I mean, if we are going to go swimming, it'd be good to put some on, wouldn't it?" He examined the tube in his hand. "It says 'waterproof'," he added, puckering his brow. "How do the Muggles do that?"

"I've told you before - Muggles have quite a good grasp of Chemistry. It's one of the ways that they compensate for magic," Hermione began, but must have seen Ron's eyes glaze over, because she stopped and said quietly, "Well, I suppose you're right."

She grasped her T-shirt at the bottom and pulled it up over her head, stretching back as she did so. It was the same swimsuit that Ron remembered from the year before - a simple, plain, cherry-colored one-piece thing. It wasn't low cut in an indecent way, but it accentuated Hermione's figure quite nicely. And the back, Ron noted with pleasure as Hermione turned around, was almost non-existent.

"Aren't you the scarlet woman?" he joked, squeezing some of the lotion into his own hand. Hermione giggled, and settled into a comfortable position on the blanket. Clumsily, he began to caress her skin. Ron wondered idly if Hermione knew how attractive she was. The skin on her back was clear and pale, and reminded Ron of a flower petal. He made a mental note to secretly hit her with a Sunblocking Charm, just in case this Muggle concoction didn't work. Gingerly, he lifted one of the straps to her suit in order to distribute the lotion across her shoulders. He heard her gasp slightly, but she didn't stop him, and he repeated the action on the other side.

Deciding that it was pushing his luck to try to explore any further here on the blanket, Ron placed both hands on Hermione's shoulders, leaned forward, and whispered, "Shall we go for a swim then?"

* * * * *

Once submerged in the water, Ron found that Hermione was more than willing to play. The lake was large and deep enough to swim a bit and the two of them raced from bank to bank several times. Ron won each time, but, as Hermione pointed out, he was much taller and physically stronger than she was.

"Yeah, well, I'm taller and stronger than Harry also," he teased lightly, "but he's a faster flyer than I am."

Hermione tutted, took a deep breath, and submerged herself in the water. Ron laughed, assuming that she'd just gone under because she couldn't think of a good retort, but was startled a second later when he felt his legs give way. He fell backwards with a 'splash', went under, and when he recovered himself, he saw Hermione standing a few feet away in the shallower water, giggling and looking very pleased with herself.

"Ginny gave me a few pointers on how to defend myself last summer," she shouted.

"Ginny never told you that she never won in the end, did she?" Ron shouted back, making a fierce face, and lumbering towards Hermione in a fairly realistic imitation of a troll. Hermione shrieked, and tried to run further out into the lake in the other direction, but Ron caught her around the waist from behind and lifted her up, taking advantage of the water to lift her up quite high.

"Aighghgh!" she squealed, kicking her legs but still laughing, "put me down or I'll - I'll..."

"You'll what?" he interrupted. "You've left your wand back on the blanket." But he put her down, turning her to face him, and still holding onto her waist.

Smiling, Hermione put her hands on his shoulders and pulled him down to give him a quick kiss. "I'll do that," she said softly.

"Remind me to torture you more often then," Ron replied, wishing his voice wouldn't give him away so often. Every time Hermione kissed him it seemed to lower his voice about two octaves. He pulled her closer and bent down to kiss her again, feeling the electricity course through his body. They'd never kissed in the water before. And they'd never had so little clothing between them. Hermione's suit was modest, but it was also thin, old, and wet, and Ron could feel every curve of her body pressed against his own. He wrapped his arms around her more tightly as they kissed, wondering if it were possible to get any closer than they already were.

Boldly he opened his mouth slightly, and allowed his tongue to flicker quickly across Hermione's lips. To his surprise, instead of resisting, she moaned slightly and parted her lips enough to allow him to explore further. He'd been dying to try this for the past week, well, for the past two years really, and he was relieved that it was being accepted so readily. Encouraged, Ron pressed his lips to Hermione's a bit harder and caressed her back slowly with his hands.

Hermione reached up and began to run her fingers through his wet hair, an action that caused Ron to forget himself for a moment. All of the concerns that had been loitering in the back of his head during the day - the Dementors, his father's job, Harry... all were pushed aside and Hermione filled him completely.

Without understanding how he knew what to do, Ron pulled his face away from Hermione and leaned forward to gently kiss her neck. He felt her shiver, and it made him shiver as well. He allowed his tongue to taste the soft skin at the base of her throat, and began to wander slowly up her jawline.

Hermione was stretching so that her neck appeared like a pale piece of silk in front of him. Her damp curls fell backwards, exposing a perfectly shaped ear. Ron wanted to taste that as well, and lightly wrapped his lips around the lobe, sucking it softly. Hermione made a small, high-pitched noise, and brought her head forward, placing her lips on his neck and pulling at the skin there.

Ron felt a low sound escape from his own throat and it surprised him. Never had he felt anything quite like this before. Suddenly he felt that he truly understood the meaning of the word "want". He wanted Hermione. He *needed* her. His hands wandered up to grip her shoulders and he pulled at one of the straps of her bathing suit as he did so. Hermione cried out, and her hands came down to grip his shoulders as well. Ron found her lips again and their mouths crushed together, both of them breathing heavily into the other. After a moment, Hermione pushed him away slightly with her hands, and said in a voice barely louder than a whisper, "Ron...wait a minute..."

Consciousness came rushing back to Ron in an instant. He pulled himself away from Hermione a few inches, and looked at her. She looked wild-eyed and disheveled, and he was suddenly conscious of the bulge that Hermione must have felt against her a moment earlier. He felt the tips of his ears burn, and he ran a hand through his hair and tried to control his breathing. They stared at each other for a long moment, chests heaving, and finally, Ron said, "Hermione, I'm sorry... I didn't mean to..."

But Hermione reached up and kissed him quickly. "It's all right," she said quietly. "I - I didn't mind, but, Ron, do you think that we should talk about this for a minute? I mean, does it seem to you that everything is moving very quickly?"

Ron bit his lip. It was hard to think about anything when Hermione was looking at him like that - when her wet bathing suit clung to her body... . No, in his mind, they'd waited long enough. A dozen kisses in two years up until last week was slow enough for him, but a voice inside his head told him that this probably wasn't the right answer.

"I, er, yeah, I mean, what do *you* think?" he finally sputtered, unable to think of a wise and understanding response.

Hermione shrugged her shoulders and began tentatively, "I just think that, well, I mean, we shouldn't rush into anything. I mean, I *want* to, but I feel like we should take our time and I don't know.... I'm not making much sense, am I?" She looked downward, and her face became wistful.

All that Ron could do was shake his head. Truth be told, it didn't really make any sense to him at all. Hermione must have noticed the blank look on his face, because she continued, "I want to spend a bit more time exploring..."

Grinning, Ron ran a finger from her neck down to the strap of her bathing suit and slid his finger underneath it. "I was *trying* to explore," he explained.

Hermione looked sideways at his hand on her shoulder, her mouth open slightly. She took a deep breath. "I think that maybe we should restrict ourselves to, um, above the neck exploration for the time being."

Ron felt his stomach lurch in disappointment and the feeling extended to other parts of his

body. He looked away for a moment, feeling extremely frustrated, and when he looked back at Hermione, noticed that she looked somewhat frightened, as if she expected him to throw a tantrum of some kind. He sighed deeply, then reached up to stroke her cheek and said soothingly, "All right Hermione. I'll let you lead the way."

She nodded, looking suddenly quite young, and slightly defeated, reminding Ron of the way she always looked after losing a chess match to him. A sudden thought occurred to him. This would be another game with Hermione, and, if he played his cards right, he'd be winning in no time. Even if it took a while, it would be fun, no doubt about that. He smiled broadly at her. "You'll have to clue me into the rules, of course."

Hermione started furrowed her brow. "What do you mean, 'the rules'?"

"Well," said Ron, taking a step closer so that his toes were touching hers in the soft earth at the bottom of the lake, "you have to let me know what I'm allowed to do..."

He leaned in and gave her a peck on the cheek. "I'm allowed to do this, right?" Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "Don't be silly," she said, trying to sound annoyed.

Ron held up his hands in mock protest. "Hey! I'm just making sure!" He bent his head and kissed Hermione chastely on the lips. "I know that's allowed as well, right?" he questioned quietly, not bothering to remove his lips from hers.

"Yes," answered Hermione a bit breathlessly, and Ron sucked at her bottom lip teasingly. He ran his tongue over her top teeth and murmured, "You know, I would have loved your teeth either way..."

"Oh," Hermione gasped, placing her hands on his chest. Her fingers rested there and he moaned slightly, and placed his own hands around her waist, crushing her to him. "Is this okay?" he asked, moving his mouth to kiss the tip of her chin, softly. "And this?" he prompted, sucking at a freckle on her jaw.

"Ron, you're teasing me," she protested lightly, but did not try to escape his embrace.

"Only where you want to be teased," he replied and began kissing her cheeks and forehead. He let his lips trail back down her face to her earlobe again, and pulled it into his mouth, enjoying the way that her fingers began to spread across his chest. Knowing that Hermione was somewhat distracted, he moved his hands slowly from around her waist to the front of her torso. She made no move to stop him. Encouraged, and half-knowing that he was going to be reprimanded, he allowed his hands to slide upwards, and let them rest in the crevice below her breasts. He continued to graze at her ear with his tongue, and then, in what he considered a brilliant tactical move, began to taste the hard rim at it's entrance while simultaneously allowing his hands to shift position so that his fingers grazed the tips of her breasts, which were hardened from the breeze in the lake.

Hermione let out a strangled cry and it took all of his courage to keep from pushing further. "You touched me first," he whispered in her ear. "That means it's allowed, right?"

Hermione pushed away from him and surveyed him thoughtfully. After a moment she said firmly, "Only above clothes."

"But I'm not wearing a shirt!" Ron exclaimed indignantly. "And I'd let you touch me there any time you want." He raised his eyebrows suggestively.

"Ron." Hermione put her arms around his waist and stepped close to him again. "Please... I know it seems silly to you, but - can we at least start out this way? It's just that I - I love you so much and I want to *know* everything that I can know about you. I'm not saying this very well..." She turned her head to the side, a pensive look on her face, casting about for words. And suddenly, Ron understood. He would do anything she wanted him too. He could be patient, and he could follow the 'rules', no matter how ridiculous they seemed to him at times. And he could continue to fight, because one thing that Hermione loved was a challenge. And he knew that when the time did come to move things along, that he'd find that most likely, Hermione'd been right all along, although he'd never tell her.

Raising a thumb to stroke her cheek, Ron smiled seriously at her. "Whatever you want," he said quietly, and kissed her. This time his hands stayed around her waist, but his heart and his soul poured into her and it was a long while before either one of them felt like climbing out of the lake and onto the shore.

— CHAPTER FIVE —

Goldie's Liquid Curse

“Come on Harry, we’re going to the pub.”

“What?” Harry looked up, apparently puzzled by this sudden statement from Ron.

They were all sitting in the cozy sunroom at Lupin Lodge. Hermione and Ginny were in one corner, giggling over some Muggle magazines that they had purchased. Remus was sitting in his chair, studiously reading a large, battered book on gardening, and Sirius was dozing quietly on the sofa. This was the first evening since their arrival that Sirius had been home for supper—he’d been working tirelessly to see to the safety of the Azkaban prisoners and he’d barely been awake while they were eating. Ron wondered somewhat guiltily if his father was in the same condition at the Burrow.

Hermione gave Ron a reassuring smile. His heart skipped a beat—it was nice to share a grin with her, tonight. They’d sat together earlier, laughing and devising ways to get Harry out of the house, and it had almost made him forget how tense he felt about all of Hermione’s job offers. He didn’t want to think about them—some instinct told him he wasn’t handling the situation very well, and that he should force himself to be a little more enthusiastic for her sake.... but he didn’t know how to change the fact that he wanted her home, with him. It was a touchy subject for both of them, and so, to stop himself from thinking any further on that score, he turned to Harry and spoke again. “We’re going down to the Snout’s Fair. I’ve been dying to go in there ever since Remus told us about the owner.”

A few nights earlier, Remus and Sirius had entertained them with tales of Goldie Becker, the aging wizard who owned the pub in the village. Stagsden, the closest town to Lupin Lodge, was technically a Muggle place, but the concentration of magical folk in the area was rather large. The Snout’s Fair was enchanted to keep the Muggles away, and it served as an important meeting place for witches and wizards for the entire region. The owner had immigrated to England from Czechoslovakia fifty years earlier (and he’d been old then) and had managed to run the pub, and tend the bar with little assistance the entire time. No one knew if ‘Goldie’ was his real name or whether it was a nickname that he earned due to the one gold tooth that flashed when he smiled. Remus and Sirius spoke fondly of spending much time there in their youth.

Harry, however, looked reluctant, as he had recently whenever anything fun was suggested. “I’ve been flying all day—I don’t know if I have the energy.”

“You’re coming with me you lazy prat,” Ron insisted, winking at Hermione and standing up.

Sirius snorted and rolled over on the sofa; Remus shot a concerned glance in his direction before nodding at Ron and Harry. “That sounds like an excellent idea.”

Harry stared at him for a moment, and looked like he was about to protest when Ginny said in a voice that reminded Ron a bit of their mother, “Yes, why don’t you two just go—we have important things to discuss, don’t we Hermione?” The two of them dissolved into laughter and went back to pointing at things in their magazine. Ron stood and craned his neck in order to try to see what they were reading—it looked like some sort of quiz, and he rolled his eyes at the very idea. It was just like Hermione, to sit around taking quizzes for fun. Her face was all lit up as if it were a Quidditch match and she glanced over at Ginny mischievously, tossing back her hair to see the page better.

Ron felt his ears get hot as he briefly studied Hermione, letting his eyes wander over her while she was preoccupied. She’d got quite brown from being outdoors, and her skin showed up prettily against the white of her sleeveless shirt. It was much different from the way he was accustomed to seeing her—all library-pale in long black robes. He liked her both ways, but with her skin tanned like this... well, even when she was in a perfectly decent Muggle outfit, he couldn’t help seeing her in that bathing suit. His ears burned hotter at the image, but he grinned. If he were staying home tonight, there *definitely* wouldn’t be any quizzes. He’d drag her away from that test, whatever it

was, and take her off to somewhere... a bit more private. Maybe try a bit of night swimming. Ron felt his blood thump suddenly at the remembered feeling of water, and air, and Hermione's hands putting sunscreen all over his back. There wasn't much else he wanted to think about. There wasn't much else he wanted to *do*.

But not tonight, he reminded himself firmly. Tonight was about getting Harry out of the house, and out of his mood. Ron wrenched his eyes from Hermione, then walked determinedly to the doorway and turned to Harry. "You coming?" he demanded.

Sighing heavily, as if Ron had just suggested going out to play Quidditch with a pair of Blast-ended Skrewts, Harry rose and followed him out the door.

* * * * *

The evening was a bit chilly for summer. It was two miles into town, but they chose to walk, strolling down the tiny winding roads and through the Muggle village. Ron and Harry said little in the beginning; Ron finally broke the silence.

"It's going to be Switzerland versus Sweden in the World Cup this year. I can't wait for the English teams to start up again. I wonder when they're going to have the tryouts?"

Harry shrugged. Ron waited for a moment, then tried again.

"That was an interesting question that Eloise asked yesterday—do you think you might want to try out?"

Harry brightened a bit. "Dunno, maybe. Yeah—it might be fun. I developed a few moves this week—I'd like a chance to use them in a game."

"You've been practicing a lot—I'd like to learn a few—can you show me tomorrow?"

"All right."

They trudged along. It was twilight—the sun was taking a while to go down. Finally they rounded a bend and the Snout's Fair came into view. Ron pushed open the heavy wooden door and Harry followed him into the pub. It was relatively busy—all the tables were taken, but there were several seats at the bar. Ron and Harry slid onto two stools and an elderly, yet hearty looking wizard with a large smile and a golden tooth who could only be Goldie Becker himself, approached them to take their order.

"D'you have anything stronger than Butterbeer?" asked Ron curiously.

Goldie grinned, revealing the famous golden tooth. "Vell, I suppose ve do! How old are you boys?"

"Eighteen," answered Ron. Harry was still seventeen, but his birthday was in a couple of weeks, and they were both of age anyway.

"I tink dat you are being old enough den," answered Goldie, pouring something murky and green into two small glasses. He placed them on the counter with a plunk and waited. Ron and Harry exchanged glances, and, like so many times during their friendship, each seemed to know what the other was thinking. Taking a deep breath, each of them reached for a glass and in one swift movement threw the drink down their throats. Harry coughed loudly, and clutched at his chest. Ron grimaced, and then grinned broadly. He raised an eyebrow at the bartender, grabbed Harry's glass in the same hand as his own, and pushed them back down the bar with a nod. Goldie refilled them with a flourish.

Ron placed Harry's glass in front of him, raised his own high in the air, and said loudly, "To the summer!" Harry didn't speak, but he smiled shortly, clinked glasses with Ron and downed the second shot. Neither one of them coughed this time. Goldie stood by, watching appreciatively.

"You must be Harry Potter," he said, holding a hand out to Harry, who took it and shook it vigorously. "Your fader came in here several times vit his friends. And you," he continued, looking at Ron, "must be the Veasley boy. Remus Lupin vas in here last veek and mentioned dat I might be seeing de two of you."

Ron nodded, reached out his hand and said, "Yeah, I'm Ron." He liked Goldie. A moment later, a wizard drawled from across the room, "Goldie! Shut your mouth and send me another Butterbeer Extra! I'm empty over here." The bartender rolled his eyes at Ron and Harry, pulled out his wand, and sent a bottle flying across the room. "That's twelve, Mr. Lipsett!" he shouted at the man. "I haff been counting."

"Excuse me," said Goldie, who was now being asked to send several more drinks across the room. He pulled a round bottle out from under the counter and set it in front of Ron and Harry. "A velcome gift," he said and he nodded to the boys before moving to the other side of the bar.

Ron poured Harry another shot and drank one himself. The liquid burned as it went down his throat, but Ron found that he didn't mind so much. Harry's face was very red, and Ron realized that when he tried to talk, he couldn't feel his lips. He laughed through his nose and Harry cracked the first real smile that Ron had seen in months. They both roared with laughter.

An attractive middle-aged witch with long, dark hair and form-fitting blue robes walked by them. Both boys watched her walk past with their mouths hanging open and then started laughing again when she was out of earshot.

"Good thing Hermione's not here," said Harry solemnly, pouring them each another drink.

"Hey!" protested Ron. "We have a very open relationship! I can look at other witches!"

"Yeah, as long as Hermione's two miles away and doesn't see you," smirked Harry, ducking as Ron reached out to swat him on the head.

The truth was, Ron thought, glancing over Harry's shoulder at the good-looking witch down the bar, it really didn't matter how pretty other girls were. Sure, he'd notice them. But when he imagined kissing someone, it was always Hermione. And she could kiss, too, Ron reflected, remembering the warmth of her mouth and the pressure of her hands gripping his arms as they'd stood in the water. She could kiss like anything. But then, that wasn't surprising, was it? Hermione was top notch at everything she put her mind to. Ron leaned his chin in his hand absently and tried to remember the exact feeling of her curves as they'd fitted against him, barely separated from his chest by a thin layer of bathing suit-

"Oi. Wake up, Weasley."

Ron felt something hit his arm. Harry had taken a dancing peanut from a bowl on the bar, and flicked it at him. Shaking off his thoughts, Ron grinned, plucked a peanut out of the bowl himself, and aimed at Harry. The boys entertained themselves for a while, dodging dancing peanuts and laughing uncontrollably as their aim became progressively worse. Harry was definitely in good spirits, and Ron was feeling very happy. His head was light and he swayed slightly on his seat. He reached over to a nearby barstool and picked up a worn copy of the *Daily Prophet*.

"Harry!" he said excitedly, looking at the front page. "Quidditch tryouts are starting soon! They're forming seven teams to start with for England. Look! Oliver Wood's been named Captain for the Cannons! Brilliant! You should try out! He'd love to have you as Seeker!"

"Neville would make a good Seeker for the Cannons," Harry mumbled under his breath.

Ron stared at Harry, mouth open in mock-surprise. "What are you saying? You don't like the Cannons? Since when?" Ron knew that the Cannons didn't have the best reputation in the world, but they had potential-they'd always had potential.

"Well, maybe I will try out for them then, since they're starting early. I wouldn't mind playing with Oliver again. Besides," Harry added, "I can always try out for Puddlemere later in the year, when all the good teams are having tryouts."

Ron whacked Harry over the head with an empty bowl. "What makes you think you're good enough for Puddlemere, Mr. Big Shot?"

Harry ignored this last statement, rubbed his head, and frowned. "Why don't *you* try for the team if you think it's such a brilliant idea?" he demanded, pointing an unsteady finger at Ron and then gripping the bar suddenly as if he was about to lose his balance.

Ron laughed at him. "Because," he answered honestly, "the only team I'd want to be on is the Cannons, and the only position I'm really good at is Keeper. And Oliver's also a good Keeper and he's already on the Cannons. So, I'd have to kill Oliver to get on the team, and then I'd be disqualified for being a murderer. So it wouldn't really work. It's too bad, because I need to find a job." Ron shrugged, sighed, and kicked back another shot of the still unidentified green liquid. He felt suddenly sluggish. Hermione had two dozen job opportunities available to her, but he didn't have the foggiest idea what he wanted to do with his life.

"Did I hear you say dat you need a job?" asked Goldie, who had been standing nearby, chatting with an elderly wizard in a yellow hat.

"Yeah," answered Ron gloomily, "I thought it might be a good idea if I wanted to, you know, eat. Why? You hiring?"

Goldie shrugged, "I vas tinkin about it-I haff not had an assistant here in two years. I am not young anymore. And business is good since de var."

"I don't know anything about drinks and things," said Ron, picking up the now half empty bottle in front of him. "I don't even know what the hell I've been drinking all evening."

"I can teach dat to you. I call that recipe 'Goldie's Liquid Curse'. It is a secret, ancient recipe from my homeland. Tending the bar-it is not difficult. Can you cook?"

Ron blushed. It wasn't something he wanted to admit in public. Harry answered for him. "Ron can make the best ruddy coffee and toast for miles!"

Ron looked over at his friend. Harry seemed-overly cheerful. He wasn't sure whether to be relieved or concerned. Deciding not to worry, he turned his attention back to Goldie.

"Dere you have it-making de drinks is like cooking," said Goldie with a smile.

"Come around to dis side of de counter, and I will teach you a few tricks."

Goldie lifted the countertop to the right of him and Ron, now feeling entirely dizzy, slid off the barstool and wobbled behind the bar to stand next to Goldie.

"I'll be the customer!" said Harry loudly, causing several patrons to turn their heads.

"Give me some more of this green stuff, bartender!" Harry slammed the glass down on the counter so hard that a bowl of peanuts tipped over and soon they were dancing all over the place.

Goldie looked at Ron expectantly. Ron picked up the bottle in front of Harry, bowed, and said, "Don't mind if I do!" He then lifted the bottle to his own lips and gulped.

"First rule," said Goldie patiently, pulling the bottle out of Ron's hands. "A bartender must not drink vail he is vorkink. No more drinkink for you this efenink. You vill say instead, 'But of course.'"

Ron cleared his throat, took the bottle back from Goldie and said, in a perfect imitation of the innkeeper's accent, "But of course," and he poured Harry a drink, spilling a bit onto the counter.

"Vonderful!" exclaimed Goldie, clapping Ron on the back, "Now, clean up dis mess dat you haff made." He stuck a dishtowel in Ron's hands and pointed at the counter.

"Yes," said Harry solemnly, "you have made a terrible mess Mr. Weasley. I will not tolerate it." Ron swatted the towel at Harry and then deftly wiped up the place where he had spilled.

"You are a natural!" exclaimed Goldie with a hint of amusement in his eyes. "You can come back tomorrow-around seven? I pay you thirty-five Galleons every veek, plus you may keep any tips that come your vay. Deal?"

"Deal," said Ron delightedly, shaking Goldie's hand. He had a job—a real job. He had to go home and tell Hermione.

"Come on, Harry."

But Harry's head was buried in his arms, face down on the counter. He lifted his head at the sound of Ron's voice, glasses sideways, hair sticking out in all directions. "Wha-?" he asked confusedly.

"We're going home! I have to tell Hermione that I got a job! And I didn't even have to write a letter! Come on." Ron pulled at Harry's T-shirt and Harry fell off the stool, barely landing on his feet.

"Goodbye boys!" waved Goldie as they exited the pub.

"Bye!" they waved back and wobbled down the road towards Lupin Lodge. The night air seemed to bring Ron back to his senses. Harry, on the other hand, seemed to have less of a tolerance for 'Goldie's Liquid Curse', and kept bumping into Ron as they walked.

Ron started trying to calculate how much money he would have to save to buy a newer racing broom and wondering if the tips were generous at the Snout's Fair. Maybe he could even take Hermione out for dinner—his dad had taken his mum out a couple of times and she'd always seemed happy about it.

"Hey, Harry?" he asked, reaching out an arm to steady his friend, who had just stumbled over a rock.

"Hey, Ron?" Harry let out a short laugh and stumbled again.

"Will you come to the pub tomorrow night while I'm working?" he asked.

"Yes!" Harry answered, attempting to slap Ron on the shoulder. "Maybe Colin will come take your picture!"

Ron glanced sideways at Harry, who was no longer making much sense. "Yeah, right," he said with a laugh, feeling somewhat proud that he could handle his liquor better than his friend. "But seriously, you should come—and I hope Hermione will come too. And Ginny. It'll be fun to have everyone there, don't you think?"

Harry stopped walking. He was looking down at his feet, frowning slightly.

"You okay, Harry?" Ron asked, hoping he wouldn't have to float his friend home.

"I don't know...I mean, maybe I won't come. I wouldn't want to bother you on your first day. I can come another time—alone, you know?"

Ron frowned. Something that had been bothering him ever since Expecto Sacrificum surged to the front of his brain. Maybe now was the time to confront Harry about it. That way, if Harry was upset, he might not remember in the morning. One time Bill had come home from a pub quite drunk and had not even been angry that Fred and George had suspended Dungbombs above his bedroom door.

"Harry..." he began, trying to figure out how to best phrase his question. He and Hermione had discussed this numerous times in the past week. Hermione insisted that Harry cared deeply for Ginny, and that he just needed time to work it out. Ginny certainly didn't seem anxious or upset around Harry; but then again, she was a good actress, wasn't she? Ron hadn't even suspected that

Ginny still cared that way for Harry until Hermione had told him in the library at Hogwarts. It had been quite a shock.

A protective feeling overcame Ron, and he decided to be blunt.

"When are you going to tell her how you feel?" It was the same thing that Harry had said to him during fifth year, after Ron had refused to go to visit Hogsmeade with Harry and Hermione. He understood the feeling. He had been so bothered by the realization of his feelings for Hermione that he'd managed to avoid her steadily for at least a month.

Harry started to walk again. His hands were in his pockets and he was walking quite fast, although not in a straight line.

"Damn!" Ron muttered to himself and jogged a bit to catch up. "Harry! Wait up!" Harry maintained his pace. Ron grabbed his arm. Harry stopped.

"Look," he said, "I'm sorry, Harry. I didn't mean to interfere. It's just that—you seem so unhappy all the time now. I just thought that now that everything's over—well, you know, we can get on with things."

Harry looked away. Finally he said, in a very quiet voice. "Can we just not talk about it right now? I don't want to talk about it. Okay?"

Ron continued to stare. "Okay," he said finally. "But if you do want to talk, you know you can come to me, right? I mean, you've provided a shoulder for me more than once, mate." He cleared his throat. "Right?"

"Thanks," Harry muttered.

Ron nodded, feeling a bit awkward. It wasn't often that he and Harry had to speak about their friendship—it was just *there*—and they'd certainly never spoken about Ginny. The words left an odd tension hanging in the air between them. Wanting to get rid of it, Ron grinned suddenly, shoved Harry to the side, and broke into a run. "Race you!" he shouted.

He heard Harry's feet stumbling behind him and hoped that everything would be all right.

* * * * *

"Now we can take this quiz properly," Ginny announced in a business-like fashion. She settled cross-legged on her bed, placing an open magazine on her lap.

Hermione pointed her wand at the battered WWN receiver on the night table, and with a hiss of strange static unlike what Hermione had been used to from Muggle radios, the wireless turned on. A moment later, loud music poured from the box. She raised an eyebrow at Ginny, then rotated her wand to reduce the volume and sat down on her own bed.

Ginny flipped through the pages, cleared her throat and said, "Here—this looks quite good—'Are You Experienced? Take this Quiz!'"

Rolling her eyes and trying to act nonchalant, Hermione snorted, "Experienced at what?"

Ignoring the question, Ginny placed a finger on the page and read, "'Are you a nun or a scarlet woman? Answer our questions to find out.' Question one—" Ginny paused and let out a giggle—"these first ones are boring." She started scanning the page, muttering as she circled things with her quill. "Yes, you have a boyfriend; yes, you are in love; yes, I've seen him hold your hand and I've seen him kiss you as well... Okay! I need help with the rest. Ready?"

Hermione nodded, reaching in the night table drawer for Ginny's bag of nail polish. She wasn't quite sure that she wanted to take this quiz.

"Right. Have you ever 'French-kissed'?" Ginny stopped and furrowed her brow. "What does *that* mean? It must be a Muggle phrase." Her eyes widened, then she giggled and said teasingly, "Oh, here, it says—'kissed with your tongue'." She wrinkled her nose and stuck her own tongue out at Hermione.

Hermione rummaged through the bag, which contained an odd assortment of wizard nail polish. It was similar to Muggle polish except that the colors would occasionally twinkle with tiny stars and moons as your fingers and toes moved. It was certainly very attention-getting. Pretending not to hear the question, she pulled a blue bottle out of the bag and said, "I can't believe you still have this, Ginny. Honestly."

Ginny looked up, smiling, and stuck a foot out on the bed. "I haven't worn it in a long time. You don't like it?"

Hermione shrugged, digging through the small zipped pouch for what she considered a proper color. "It's blue."

"I love that color—it matches my swimsuit—and *you* gave it to me!"

"Only because you said you wanted it! I didn't understand it then, and I won't pretend to now."

"Just answer the question Hermione—and paint my toes while you're at it!" They both giggled and

Hermione moved over to Ginny's bed, shaking the bottle of polish. She opened the bottle, examined the color on the brush, and then finally muttered, "Yes."

"I thought so," answered Ginny, circling the answer in the magazine. "You're doing quite well at this Hermione—it's too bad that there aren't N.E.W.Ts in *experience*. Okay, next question." Ginny looked down at the quiz, pulled a horrible face, and shook her head. "I just can't believe that anyone would let my brother do this to them," she muttered.

"Well," answered Hermione, matter-of-factly, "just about anything that you ask me from that quiz is going to involve your brother, so maybe you'd better stop asking." She hoped she didn't sound too squeamish about it.

The truth was, reflected Hermione, as Ginny set the magazine aside and reached for the bag of nail polish, Ginny's brother was on her mind most of the time these days. It seemed like everything made her think of Ron, and though she tried valiantly to keep her mind on other things, it rarely worked. Just the fact that her skin was unusually warm and brown tonight from being out in the sun all week was enough to set her thinking about just *how* she'd got so tan. She'd been studying down on the lakeshore, with Ron. Ron, who had taken to wearing his shirt unbuttoned in front of her when they were alone together, outside. Hermione blushed at the thought, and blushed even harder at how much she *liked* the thought. It was just that Ron looked so much older somehow, since graduation. Older, and taller—and his voice had grown so deep—

"Hermione? *Hermione*? Shall I do yours now?" Hermione was jolted out of her reverie by the sound of Ginny's slightly amused voice.

"What?" She looked at Ginny's finished toenails, which were winking and blinking dramatically. She'd done an all right job painting them, although she'd gone over onto Ginny's toes in a few places. Ginny held out the bag of polish to her.

Hermione raised her eyebrows, shook her head, and found the color she was looking for. "What do you think of this one?" she asked, holding up a small bottle of rosy beige paint.

"Hermione... it's practically skin-colored."

"It's classy."

"It's boring."

Hermione giggled. "This one then." She withdrew a bottle of shocking red, the color the Hogwarts Express.

"Hmm." Ginny looked mischievous. "Yes. I think so."

"No, I was joking, I couldn't possibly wear—"

"What? Scarlet?" Ginny giggled very hard, and Hermione had to join her.

"You're right. I want to wear it."

"Give it to me, then," Ginny ordered. "I'll do your hands."

Hermione, feeling a bit daring, handed Ginny the nail polish and put her hands out. She wondered what Ron would think of her red nails. He seemed to like her red bathing suit. She grinned to herself, even as she felt her cheeks go hot again. It was so *easy* to tell the things that Ron liked. He'd tried not to stare at her body, but he'd never been much of a hand at bluffing, and Hermione had had the powerful feeling that he could hardly keep his hands off of her. In fact, he hadn't managed it at all—he'd taken a few liberties with her bathing suit the other day. Not very *big* ones, Hermione reminded herself, quickly... but liberties all the same. Like lifting up her straps to get the sunscreen all across her shoulders. Hermione shivered a bit, realizing that if she shut her eyes, she could still feel where his fingers had slid beneath the lining. She'd caught her breath at the time, convinced for a split second that he was going to pull the straps down altogether, right there, outside. But he hadn't. He'd just put his mouth next to her ear and asked her if she wanted to have a swim. And it really hadn't been a difficult decision to put down the Apparition manual...

"Hermione? Hello? Did you hear me or not?"

"Hmmm?" Hermione stared at Ginny blankly, then shook her head and tried to gather her distracted thoughts. She seemed to be spending entirely too much time thinking about Ron. They hadn't been apart much since arriving at Lupin Lodge and Hermione hadn't realized that he'd consume her thoughts this much while they were separated. And he was only down the street, for goodness' sake. Would it be this way if she had to be apart from him for her job? How would she manage if she went away? She didn't even want to think about it.

"Hermione if you're going to drift off and go all dreamy every time I ask a question, I'm going to be sick." Hermione could tell that Ginny was joking, but it wasn't fair to spend the evening daydreaming. Smiling, and shaking back her hair, Hermione focused on the moment.

"I'm sorry Ginny—what were you asking?"

"I just wanted to know if you've decided on a job offer yet. There's a quiz in this one— it won't

help us, it's for Muggle jobs– but it reminded me of all your options.”

Sighing deeply, Hermione looked down to examine her nails. It was true–she'd received twenty-six responses to job applications in the past week. She wasn't surprised. After all, everybody was rebuilding and restructuring and there was a limited supply of talented wizards and witches. She still hadn't heard from the one place that meant the most to her. She had been doing some thinking in between visits to the lake with Ron and studying for the Apparition examination.

“Hermione, what is it?” Ginny sounded concerned, and Hermione realized that her face must have betrayed her slightly. She took a deep breath.

“I know what I want to do,” she said quietly.

“Really?” Ginny's eyes lit up. “That's wonderful! Which will it be then? The Ambassador job or the Department of Magical Education?”

Hermione shook her head. “I want to be a Thinker.”

Ginny stared at her. “A what?” she asked, curiously.

“A Thinker.” Hermione stood up and walked over to her bed. She pulled a large book out from under it. “It's a sort of problem-solver. They work out how to build complicated spells. You have to train really intensely–it's difficult and there may be only one or two in the whole world every generation, but it's an important job. I'm pretty sure that Dumbledore must have employed one to help set up the charms around Hogwarts. You have to be skilled at Arithmancy, which I am, and have the ability to concentrate intensely on one thing at a time, which I can do, but you don't have to have any special *natural* skills–I mean, it's all about training, and I wrote to the current Thinker–there's only one in Europe, and she hasn't written back but I can't help thinking that maybe that in itself is some sort of test, so... .” Hermione stopped, realizing that she'd been talking extremely quickly. It felt good to finally tell someone what she had been mulling over in her head.

“Arithmancy and concentration... hmm. Sounds impossible.” Ginny mused, then laughed and put out her hand to Hermione immediately. “No, don't look like that, I'm just teasing,” she assured. Hermione realized that her face must have fallen, and Ginny continued quickly. “It's impossible for *me*. That means it's the perfect job for you.” Ginny smiled. “Though I really *did* think you'd be interested in one of the Ministry jobs–you know, especially with my Dad up there. You know how much he likes you. So then... why this Thinker thing, and not London?”

“Oh–it's nothing to do with your Dad–” Hermione exclaimed. “You know I'd love to work for him.” And she would have, too, she reflected. It would have been wonderful to work for Arthur Weasley–Ron's parents had been such a wonderful comfort last summer, and she respected both Arthur and Molly very much. But her decision to become a Thinker wasn't merely a career choice. Under the circumstances, it was the *only* choice. And, looking at Ginny's attentive face, Hermione decided that she might as well tell her friend everything.

She pulled a tattered picture out from inside the book that she was holding. It was a Muggle photo of herself and her parents. She was sitting in one of the chairs in their office and they were standing on either side of her, both pretending to examine her teeth. She handed it to Ginny. “Those doctors at St. Mungo's don't know what they're doing. Neville's parents have been there for nearly seventeen years. I don't want mine to be in there that long... like they are. It's too awful. If I go and get this training–if I learn how to *really* Think and manipulate magic, well, I've got as much of a chance as any of them to find a cure, don't I? I mean, I've already done it once with Expecto Sacrificum. I can do it again, can't I? Because if *I* don't do it, then nobody–”

Hermione stopped. Her impassioned speech had brought her to the verge of tears, and Ginny seemed to know it. Her friend's arms flew around her without a second's hesitation.

“Of course you can do it,” Ginny declared, hugging Hermione tightly. “And if you don't hear from this Thinker, then I think you should just *go*.”

Hermione nodded, pulling away. “That's what I've been thinking. I'll wait until the end of the summer. If I don't hear anything by then, I'll just... leave.”

“Yes, Hermione, you absolutely should. What does Ron say about it?”

Hermione felt tears forming in her eyes all over again and she swiped at them quickly. “Nothing–yet. Okay, Ginny?”

Ginny nodded at her in understanding. Everyone knew that Ron was already upset at the thought of Hermione having to leave England for work, and Hermione didn't want to spend their summer fighting about it. She had decided not to tell him about the Thinker just yet. The training would be less than a year, and after that, she could stay in England indefinitely. She knew that Ron would be supportive in the end–he *had* to be–but in the meantime, she wanted to relax.

Ginny reached for the magazine they had been reading earlier and cleared her throat. “Speaking of Ron–question eleven,” she began, slyly, looking from the question to Hermione with curiosity in her eyes.

Hermione raised an eyebrow quickly and smiled in what she hoped was a wicked way. "How about I ask *you* some questions, Ginny?" she laughed, turning the tables in an effort to deflect the question before it was asked.

But instead of returning her laughter, Ginny stopped smiling altogether. She dropped her eyes and flushed as if slightly embarrassed, focusing on her pedicure. "You can ask," she said softly, scraping some of the blue polish off of her skin. "But there's nothing to tell."

Feeling instantly terrible for putting her friend on the spot, Hermione reached out her hand and touched Ginny's arm. If Ginny didn't want to talk about Harry, she could understand it perfectly. She remembered not wanting to say a word about Ron. Unaccustomed to being the 'experienced' female in the room after seven years of rooming with Lavender and Parvati, she felt that she should say something reassuring—but she didn't know what it should be. Ginny had used to come to her about Harry, but she hadn't spoken about him at all since *Expecto Sacrificum*. She'd gone quiet almost as if there was no point.

"Ginny... he'll come around." Hermione spoke with conviction. "He *will*."

Ginny looked up swiftly with such a wanting in her eyes that Hermione drew back slightly. But the look disappeared almost instantly, and instead, Ginny gave a wry laugh. "Oh, of *course* he will. When I'm a hundred. It's a good thing wizards live so bloody long." She laughed again. "Honestly, Hermione, he'll be lucky if he comes around in time."

She spoke as if she was joking, but Hermione knew she wasn't. Hermione wanted to respond—to say that it *would* happen in time—but when she opened her mouth to do so, Ginny shook her head.

"Can we talk about it later?" she asked, and though her tone was still light, it was quite firm. "I'm having too good a time." With a shake of her ponytail, she grabbed up the magazine and grinned. "Now. I'm sure that Lavender could tell us all about questions eight, nine, and ten. I couldn't sleep one night and went down to the common room and heard some things that I'd rather not have heard."

Hermione snorted. Apparently there was no point in pursuing the matter with Ginny, and in any case, it was funny to think of what she must have heard down in the common room. Seamus Finnigan and Lavender Brown had been Gryffindor's most demonstrative couple. But although Hermione had little patience for Lavender's constant babbling and obsession with clothes, hair, and makeup, she had to admit that her roommate had been a true Gryffindor. Lavender had fought bravely with the rest of them in the final battle against Voldemort, and when Seamus had been hit by a curse—albeit a mild one sent out by a younger Slytherin student—Lavender had staunchly warded off any others who tried to come near him. Hermione wondered how they were spending their summer, and whether Lavender and Seamus would announce plans for a wedding soon. Lavender had mentioned something about it at the end of their seventh year, and it made them seem so... old. She said as much to Ginny.

"Well, a wedding would be fun, wouldn't it?" Ginny answered, pulling another magazine from the pile. We'd have to get new dress robes though—I've not had any since the Yule Ball and I doubt that those fit me." Hermione looked over at Ginny a bit enviously. Her friend was a good three or four inches taller than she was—and rather slender. Hermione was sure that her own robes would fit perfectly well. She hadn't grown at all since fourth year.

"Oh!" said Hermione, looking at her trunk, which was lined up next to Ginny's against the wall. "Have you got them with you?"

Ginny nodded. "You?" she asked.

With a smile, Hermione jumped off the bed and headed for her trunk. A second later she was digging around and pulling at something periwinkle blue in color. She fingered the silky material and turned to Ginny. "Find yours!" she encouraged her friend, tossing the robes on her bed and rummaging for a little box of jewelry.

She'd begun to fasten in her earrings when it struck her that her mother had sent her this jewelry to wear at the Yule Ball, in her fourth year. It had been her grandmother's, and her mother had given it to Hermione for her first "real date". Hermione had worn it again for the pre-commencement banquet at Hogwarts, and Ron had told her how pretty she looked. She picked up the ring and looked at it sadly before sliding it on. Her mother, she reflected, hardly even knew Ron.

"They're a bit wrinkled," said Ginny, holding her white robes out in front of her and then spreading them out on the bed. She straightened Hermione's as well, waved her wand over them, and soon the gowns were smooth and fresh looking.

Hermione took hers and slipped them on. She'd been right, they did still fit—if anything, they were now a bit loose.

"Oh my! Hermione—look at this!" Ginny was laughing, and, swirling around, Hermione could see why. The white robes of four years ago fit Ginny very poorly. The hem stopped just above her

ankles and the bodice was stretched tightly across her chest. "I can't move!" she gasped, trying to lift her arms above her shoulders and failing. "I had a growth spurt after third year!"

She tried to sit on the bed. "I can't even sit down!" Sighing, Ginny changed into her nightdress.

Hermione whirled around a few times, then sat on the chair by the mirror to quietly finish the experience quiz. She was curious now. 'Have you ever....?' She stole a look at Ginny, who had picked up another magazine, and then skimmed question eleven to see what had made Ginny want to ask it. The question made Hermione blush furiously and she wondered what made her redder: the question itself, or the fact that she could answer 'yes' to it. Not that it was so *very* much to do, really, Hermione reasoned, trying to regulate her heartbeat to normal again. She'd known Ron since their first day on the Hogwarts Express. He definitely knew enough about her, and she about him. And they'd certainly waited long enough to... explore their relationship. She trusted him so much—it felt so natural to let him kiss her. And touch her. She could press up close to him in nothing but her bathing suit and even though it was nerve-wracking and terrifying it also felt... *right*. So right that it was almost unstoppable; it made her want to—

"Going to bed, girls," called Sirius, from outside the door.

"Goodnight," called Remus.

Hermione lifted her head quickly, her face burning as though everyone in the house could hear her thoughts aloud. She looked at Ginny, who was holding up her hair with one hand, biting her lip and concentrating on a picture in the magazine.

"Goodnight!" they chorused back together, too loudly, then went into a fit of laughter for no reason at all. Hermione felt a little short of breath. Needing to distract herself from quizzes, she stood up and walked over to Ginny, who had the magazine open to a girl with a glamorous halo of curls piled onto her head. "Let me do your hair," she said, taking the magazine from Ginny. "This is perfect for your hair."

Ginny gaped. "You want to... do my hair."

"Well..." Hermione fidgeted. "Look, just let me try it out, it can't be that difficult."

Ginny looked doubtful. "My hair doesn't really curl well," she began.

"Nonsense! Are we witches or aren't we?" Hermione pulled Ginny off the bed and directed her to the dressing table. "Actually," she admitted, "You're right. I'm not so talented at these particular charms. I mean, look at *my* hair." She fished around for some elastics and pins. "But I do know how to curl hair with a wand—Lavender showed me once—let me see if I can remember. I don't have much use for it myself." She separated a few strands of hair and wrapped them around her wand. They were silent for a few minutes, looking into the mirror.

"I wish I didn't have so many freckles," sighed Ginny, touching her hand to her cheek. She *was* a bit more freckled than usual, Hermione reflected, but then again, so was Ron. It was all that time spent outdoors.

"I think freckles are lovely," Hermione answered her honestly. "They're quite interesting, and anyway, you know that they always fade away in the autumn." She pulled at another lock of Ginny's hair, wondering if *all* of Ron's freckles were going to fade and hoping that some of them were going to stick around. She knew the ones on his face by heart, but this week she'd begun to memorize the ones on his chest and his back and sometimes they almost looked like constellations. Hermione smiled. The scatter on his left shoulder looked just like Perseus, and she thought that was very fitting. Of course, she'd had to fight to remember that constellation's name the other day. It was so difficult to keep her brain in order when Ron was standing close against her in the water, *doing* things to her. Trailing his mouth down her neck. She had to fight for every ounce of rational thought, and fight she had. She couldn't just let him do everything he wanted—not yet—even though... even though she wished she hadn't made the stupid over-the-clothing rule. Hermione sighed wistfully. She could hardly take it back now, she supposed, but if it had felt like that *over* the clothes, she could only imagine what—

"Ouch!" shrieked Ginny. Hermione jumped, and realized that she had pulled a final curl a bit too tightly on Ginny's head.

"Sorry," she muttered, and pulled it a bit looser. She took a deep breath, shook her head, and looked at Ginny in the mirror. "You look lovely," she said, removing her wand from the stack of brilliant red curls. "Very regal."

Ginny tutted, a habit she'd undoubtedly picked up from Hermione, and swiveled in the chair. "Your turn," she said brightly, reached carefully for a magazine on the floor so as not to topple her curls. "This one would be lovely," she said, showing Hermione a picture she'd found earlier.

Hermione looked at the picture and then at herself in the mirror. A week of sun and humidity had turned her hair into a long, tangled, frizzy mess. "All right," she said doubtfully. "But you're going to need a lot of the Sleekeazy's Hair Potion."

Ginny patted her on the shoulder, "Leave it to me, Madame."

Hermione watched with interest as Ginny began curling bits of hair around her wand. It wasn't that she really cared too much about her looks, though she did try to take better care of her hair now than she had used to. But it was just a relief to sit here with Ginny and do something truly pointless. Hermione was totally unaccustomed to relaxing; it wasn't in her nature and there simply hadn't been time for it at school. There had always been some terrible danger, or crisis, or massive exam. But here she was now, happily allowing her hair to be pulled back by her best girlfriend, who was humming along to the WWN.

The song on the wireless switched after a moment, and Ginny's pretty hum died away. Hermione listened to the music for a moment, deciding that she liked it very much. "What's this song?" she asked.

"Hmm? Oh, I never know the names of songs, I just remember tunes," Ginny answered absently.

It was a love song, and Hermione turned slightly in her chair to hear it better. She felt as if she could quite project herself into the lyrics, feeling them as her own. But Ginny withdrew her wand from Hermione's hair suddenly, and pointed it at the wireless.

"Oh, don't change it," Hermione said quickly. "Don't you like it?"

Ginny gave a half-smile, but Hermione thought she looked rather tired. "I like it. It's just that this song came out the summer right after my first year." She shrugged. "It reminds me of Voldemort. But if you want to listen to it—"

Hermione's eyebrows shot up. "No, no. That's fine. Let's have the news or something."

Ginny flicked her wand immediately to change the station, and the news poured from the wireless. She then tucked a few stray curls into place, framed Hermione's face with her hands and said, "Voilà!"

More pleased than usual with her reflection, Hermione stood up slowly. "Thank you! I've never felt so—wait. Let me hear this a minute." She turned towards the wireless, her ear caught by the news.

The newscaster's voice was young and vibrant and male; it crackled through the hole in the center of the small cube. "... and while a new class of Aurors goes into training, Dark Arts crime falls to the MLES to regulate. MLES head, Amos Diggory, states that his team is still doing its best to insure that all claims of Death Eaters-still-at-large are being thoroughly investigated. In other news, the prison situation has not changed and the Azkaban guards are still being guarded themselves! Our Aurors are on the spot with twenty-four hour Patronus Charms. It's no secret, however, that Arthur Weasley and Sirius Black are working on a new system of justice here in Diagon Alley—couple of Ministry daredevils, they are!"

"What?" Hermione gasped, torn between shock and laughter.

Ginny grinned widely at the radio. "Wow. Dad's a daredevil."

Hermione did laugh at that, but felt compelled to add, "Well, newscasters aren't supposed to talk that way. That's a very cheeky way to refer to the Minister of Magic."

"Oh, come on. I think it's great." Ginny was still beaming. "Anyway maybe Dad'll let us call him Mr Daredevil or something. He never lets us call him the Minister of Magic. I tried to, in a letter the other day, and he sent me back an owl saying," Ginny affected her father's deep accent, "'Ginny, darling, now, don't get big ideas.'" She laughed. "But look at the letter." She fished it from her bedside drawer and provided it to Hermione. The letterhead on the parchment read, *From the Office of the Minister of Magic*. Hermione looked up at Ginny and returned both the letter and her grin.

"That is funny."

The answer she received was not from Ginny, however. It was from a much lower Weasley voice, which was obviously right outside the bedroom door.

"I'll give you funny."

Both girls looked at the door.

"Ron?" Hermione asked quickly, knowing quite well who it was. Her insides were fluttering just from his tone.

"Let us in, we've got news."

"Us?" Ginny whispered. She flicked off the WWN, grabbed for her dressing gown and pulled it on.

"You can't come in here!" Hermione said on reflex, going to the door and standing so close to it that she could have leaned forward two inches and kissed the panels. "This is the girls' room, Ron, and we decided this when we first got here. You have to stay out."

"I've got a wand out here that says differently," Ron retorted. He was obviously as close up to the door as she was—she heard him bump against it slightly and she put up her hands. It was oddly

electrifying, being so near him, having his voice so close, yet not being able to see him. Hermione leaned against the door on instinct and thought that she could hear him do the same. Suddenly she felt as though she were back in the water with him and her heart pounded. She tried not to remember the feeling of all his muscles, pressing against her body. He was *not* going to disorganize her mind.

"I've got a wand as well," she retorted, pulling it. He began to holler something, but Hermione called out her charm before he could call out his. "Ha!" she sang, happily, reveling in her victory. "Unbreakable. You can't get in with Alohomora."

"Fine." Ron muttered something else, and Hermione heard his wand tap the door. He laughed, and Hermione could hear Harry laughing beside him. When Ron spoke again, his voice was a low, warm growl. "Counter-Unlockable. Now *you* can't get *out*."

She stopped. She had forgotten that one. "Lie," she said stubbornly, and tapped her wand to the door. "Alohomora." The door remained shut. Outside it, both boys burst into a fit of laughter so strong that Hermione feared that they would break something. One of them must have literally collapsed to the floor and Hermione's guess was that it was Harry. His laughter seemed to be coming from a considerably lower point than Ron's.

"Oh, hell," Harry gasped, "that's funny."

"Harry!" Hermione reprimanded.

"Harry?" Ginny had come up beside her and crouched to the ground. "Are you on the floor?"

"No," he gasped. "I'm standing, I'm fine."

Ginny peered at the door suspiciously, and when she stood, there was amusement in her eyes. "He's completely drunk," she whispered to Hermione. "So is Ron."

"What?! Ron!"

But Ginny had taken control. She narrowed her eyes and they took on a fiery glint. She knocked on the door. "Ron? Open this. Now."

Ron snorted. "Oh, right, like I'm going to do what you tell me."

"Now! Come on!"

"Oh, no. I don't think so. Have a lovely night, ladies, and perhaps next time you'll think twice before locking out your friends and brothers."

"NOW!" Ginny tossed her head. "Or else I'll tell Hermione all about the time when Fred and George took one of my dresses and one of my hats and made you dress up like a—"

The door flew open. Ron stood there, fire in his eyes that matched his sister's. They faced off for a moment, until Ron realized that he had no real leverage on his side.

"You're going to have it for that," he finally muttered. Behind him, on the floor, Harry was laughing so hard that he was in tears.

"A dress... and a... a hat..." he gasped.

Ginny looked down at Harry, pressed her mouth shut on a giggle, and held out her hand. He took it and righted himself, still laughing.

The two girls stood in the doorway of their room, Ginny holding Harry's hand and obviously trying to suppress her own laughter, while Hermione crossed her arms over her chest and glared hard at Ron. He stepped right up to her, now that he was through fighting with Ginny for the time being. His look was fierce, but it wasn't quite a glare. Hermione thought she could detect humor in it, and pride, and—something else. Something that made it difficult to yell at him. She attempted it, however.

"Are you really drunk?" she asked, trying to keep her voice extremely disapproving.

"And if I am?" he challenged.

She shivered again at his tone. How did he do that? "Ron, you said you wouldn't."

"Well, I didn't," he retorted. "Not like that one, anyway." He jabbed a thumb in Harry's direction.

Harry was now fully absorbed in staring at Ginny. She didn't seem to notice—she was watching Hermione and Ron, though her hand was still in Harry's. Ron noticed, though, and he caught eyes with Hermione as if to communicate something about it, when his own eyes glazed a little bit and he began to stare openly at her.

"What?" Hermione demanded.

"What've you done?" Ron asked, sounding fascinated. He reached out slowly and touched a lock of her hair. "Are you two planning on going out somewhere?"

Hermione remembered suddenly that she and Ginny had been dressing themselves up for the past hour—they hadn't intended for anyone to see the results.

"Oh," she said, blushing and putting a hand to her hair quickly. "Nothing. We just—"

But Ron grabbed her hand and looked at her nails keenly. "Huh," he muttered, his mouth so close to her hand that Hermione felt his breath along her fingers. "Red. I like it."

Hermione blushed furiously, both at having been caught dressed-up, and at how badly she wanted to throw her arms around Ron's neck and be done with it. "Go to bed, you're not sober," she managed, snatching back her hand.

"What, I can't be sober and like that color at the same time? Is that what you're saying? Because if that's what you're saying, then Hermione, why the hell did you paint your nails?" He smiled charmingly at her and twirled his wand. "Ha." He reached out and took her hand again, rubbing his thumb across the top of it possessively.

Hermione fought herself hard. He was infuriating. His hair was tousled and his face was flushed and there was something terribly winning about him, but she wasn't about to give in. Instead, she gave him the withering look she reserved for special occasions. "Come on, Ginny," she said briskly. "We can talk to them tomorrow when they've got sense."

Ginny seemed to agree that this was the best idea—she let go of Harry's hand and it fell to his side. "Goodnight," she said quietly. He didn't answer. He was obviously completely unaware of what he was doing; he leaned back against the wall and continued to stare at her unabashedly. Ginny stood in his gaze for another moment as if drinking it in, then turned somewhat unwillingly, and walked quickly to her bed.

Hermione tried to turn away as well, but found that she couldn't go anywhere. Ron pulled her back by the hand.

"Ow, let me go—"

"No, don't go to bed, listen—I wouldn't have bothered you but, Hermione..." he stopped, his face lighting up with a grin. "I've got a job."

Hermione's mouth fell open. It was the last news she'd expected, and Ron was looking at her with such modest pride in his eyes that she forgot to be difficult. "What, now?" she asked him at once. "Tonight? But where? What happened?"

At that, Harry seemed to snap out of his stupor slightly. He shifted his gaze from the place where Ginny had been standing, and pinned it on Ron. Then he turned to Hermione as well and grinned at her. "Ron's going to tend bar down at the pub," Harry laughed. "Because he's a natural cook."

"Shut it, you." Ron gave Harry a friendly slug with his free hand, then caught up Hermione's other one so that he was holding both of hers. He looked her right in the eye. "I'm going to work nights for awhile, down in the village. I'm happy about this," he said, sounding as though he truly was. "I hoped I'd find something to get me through the summer, and it's going to be perfect—you know, just for now. It'll be fun and I'll be making money..." he looked at her, a bit anxiously. "What do you think?"

Hermione shone up at Ron, stood on tiptoe so that their noses brushed. Just before their lips met, however, she remembered that they were not alone. She fell back and looked at Harry.

Tipsy as he may have been, Harry got the idea. "Goodnight," he muttered at them. Stumbling a bit, he disappeared into his and Ron's room. Hermione stepped out into the hall, letting go of Ron's hand just long enough to pull the door shut behind her, so as not to disturb Ginny.

"Oh, Ron, really—you just got a job? Just like that?"

"Yeah. I guess Goldie liked me." Ron ducked his head, but he was smiling. "And I know it's just a pub and it's just bar work, but I—"

He was cut off. Hermione had wanted to kiss him all night, and she couldn't hold back another second. She felt some part of her brain give up control, as it so often did when she was within reaching distance of Ron. Before she knew it, her arms were tangled up around his neck and his hands had seized her shoulder blades—she opened her mouth beneath his and he kissed her, tasting like something she'd never tasted on Ron before. It was strong, and almost dizzying.

"Goodness, what did you drink?" she gasped, pulling away from him slightly.

Ron clamped his mouth shut and self-consciously turned his face to the side. "Oh, I'm sorry—"

"No, no! It's erm—actually it's all right. What is that?" She could feel herself blushing, but well... it was Ron. She was allowed to do this, with him. Saying these things to each other would just take some getting used to.

Ron smiled and leaned close to her again, letting his mouth brush hers while he talked. "It's an ancient, Eastern European secret. It was green." He kissed her again, very softly, and Hermione heard herself make a small, uncontrolled noise. "Tastes interesting anyway, doesn't it?" Ron continued, grinning. "And it made Harry crack a smile. That was a good plan, getting him out for a bit." He lowered his voice even further. "I really love your hair, Hermione."

She knew he was only this loose with his compliments because of whatever had been in the

green drinks. But she didn't care. As long as he wanted to say things like this, he could be just as loose as he liked. She felt his fingers rub along her spine and his breath against her lips. He was doing everything perfectly.

"Come down to the pub tomorrow night, while I'm working?" His voice was a whisper now.

Hermione nodded, but just barely, before she had a second opportunity to try and decipher exactly what it was that Ron had been drinking.

A/N: This is dedicated to Pavol, who has no idea that he provided so much material for this chapter and other names and places throughout the story and probably will never read it.

More A/N: Thing1 — inspiration for one or two of Harry's lines come from Chapter 12 of Veritas (except in your story, they're Ron's lines—"Ron, why don't you just talk to Hermione?"). Vapid — Butterbeer Extra is your invention from "Broken Bottles, Broken Hearts."

'Goldie's Liquid Curse' is sold in some Muggle shops under the brand name 'Unicum' (<http://www.zwackunicum.hu/>).

Please note! If you are interested in discussing this story in more detail, please visit the After the End Yahoo Group at <http://groups.yahoo.com/groups/AftertheEnd>

We will be posting alternate versions of this chapter there, as well as interim scenes, as we'll be discussing the writing process. Thanks to all who read and reviewed the previous chapters!

— CHAPTER SIX —

The Lewis House

Harry woke with a blinding headache. It gave him a second of panic; the harsh throbbing in his forehead was so reminiscent of his scar. But for once it had nothing to do with his scar, he remembered with a groan. It had to do with whatever Goldie had given them to drink at the pub last night.

"Blimey." Apparently Ron was awake as well, and groaned much as Harry had just done. "Bloody hell... not a great idea. Fun, though, wasn't it?" Ron let out a monstrous yawn. "You awake, Harry?"

"Yeah—" Harry winced at the sound of his own voice in his head. It was far too loud. "I'm never doing that again."

"Yeah, right."

"I mean it," Harry mumbled, giving a wide yawn of his own. "I'll never keep up with Oliver, if I do."

"Oliver what-Wood?"

Harry nodded, and immediately wished he hadn't. It hurt to move his head. "I'm glad the Quidditch tryouts haven't started yet," he muttered, more to himself than to Ron. "Oliver would've had me out of bed and flying two hours ago, no matter what kind of pain I was in. He's insane."

He heard Ron's bedsprings bounce, followed by the thud of his friend's feet hitting the floor. A moment later, Ron was leaning over him, freckled and grinning.

"Are you saying you're definitely going to go out for the Cannons?"

Harry blinked. He hadn't realized it, but somewhere during the course of the previous evening, he must have come to a decision.

"Yeah..." he replied slowly, feeling himself smile a bit. "I guess I am."

Ron whooped. Harry put his hands to his head and tried to block out the noise of Ron, dressing in a fury.

"Come on, Harry, get up—that's great news. I'm really glad you're going to try for it; Hermione'll want to know and Sirius too—let's go downstairs."

"My head," was Harry's vague answer.

"Oh, stop blubbering and get up. We'll have a coffee and it'll be fine. Then we can go outside and you can practice for tryouts by showing me those moves you promised."

Ten minutes later, still wincing painfully, Harry managed to follow Ron down to the dining room with his broomstick gripped in his hand. Morning light was very bright in the front window. The glare made Harry's headache worse than it had been already, though he hardly knew how that was possible. When the sun disappeared behind clouds a moment later, the shadow it left was much more tolerable, and Harry could actually make out the other occupant of the room.

Remus was already sitting at the table, sipping tea and reading the *Daily Prophet*. He looked up at the two of them, and though his eyes were tired, he was obviously amused. "Late night?" he asked.

Ron dropped with exaggerated weariness into a chair. "Very. You were right about that pub, though—Goldie's a load of fun. Gave us a welcome-to-town drink, on the house."

"Only just the one?" Remus mused, lifting an eyebrow. "Are you sure it was Goldie?"

Harry leaned his broom on the wall and dropped into a seat at the end of the table. "It was him," he answered shortly.

"Yeah, he handed us the bottle and let us go," Ron said, sounding satisfied with himself. "We must've had four or five shots apiece."

Remus chuckled. "Which was it, Harry? Four or five?"

Harry shrugged, feeling a bit sheepish, and rubbed his head. His memories of the previous night

seemed to be part-real, part-dream, and he found that it was difficult to sort them properly. The sound of laughter from beyond the kitchen door made his temples throb, and the smell of breakfast wafting towards the table made him nauseous. He wondered if eating would make him feel better or worse.

"Who's cooking?" Ron asked, lifting his nose into the air.

"Ginny," replied Remus, returning to his paper.

"Oh, good," Ron rejoined—too loudly. Harry looked askance at him as he continued to half-holler toward the kitchen door. "I was worried it might be *Hermione*, giving that cooking spellbook another try."

Hermione appeared in the door as if on cue, balancing a stack of plates in the air with her wand. She regarded Ron with her chin in the air, even though a smile tugged at her lips. "Why would I cook anything for *you*?" she asked tartly, then flashed a grin at Harry. "Morning!" she said, in an unusually singsong voice. She landed the settings safely on the table and turned away to the kitchen. "Anyway Ron, you might try and be a bit nicer; I was just out here telling Remus that you have some really good news. Although I imagine you may have forgotten it entirely by now. The two of you look a terrible wreck."

The door shut behind her and Ron watched it, a grin lighting up his face. "Well, I *do* have a bit of news, at that."

Harry, who had been distributing plates and forks with his wand during this exchange, now looked at Ron with interest. "What news?" he asked.

"What *news*?" Ron repeated, looking at Harry in disbelief.

"Yeah."

"You really don't remember?"

Harry searched his brain, but drew a blank. "I... bet I would, if you told me."

Ron laughed. "You should have seen him last night," he told Remus, who was laughing as well. "I'm not surprised you can't remember anything, Harry—you were in a state."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, feeling vaguely wary. He had a sudden vision of himself drooling stupidly down the bar. "What did I do?"

"Oh, just fell down a bit, talked loudly, laughed yourself sick. It was great."

Harry felt irritated at this description. "Glad I was entertaining," he said curtly. "Well, what's your news, come on."

Ron gave a nod, and turned to Remus. "Goldie gave me a job bartending down at the pub—I start at seven tonight."

"Yeah—I knew that," said Harry at once, suddenly remembering at least that much of the evening. Ron had landed a job. Harry felt his earlier irritation disappear and he smiled at his friend's good luck.

"Excellent, Ron!" was Remus's reply.

"Ron, that's so great!" Ginny was in the door. She and Hermione carried breakfast to the table and sat down. "Does this mean I get free butterbeer whenever I want?" Ginny shot Harry a grin.

But he couldn't smile back. The sight of Ginny brought the previous evening into sharp and unwelcome focus. Harry had a strong memory of her having been there at some point, though he couldn't remember speaking to her at all. In fact—his stomach writhed slightly—if he was remembering things correctly, then he'd stood there and stared her down, for quite some time. Something about her hair...

Ginny didn't seem to remember it, or if she did, she wasn't allowing it to affect her. But Harry saw that her hair looked as though it had been done up for a party, then slept upon directly. It was piled up high on the back of her head, and tendrils were coming loose all over. That, coupled with the fact that she was still in her dressing gown, made her a very endearing picture at the moment.

"I dunno, Gin." Ron shook his head, with an air that reminded Harry distinctly of Percy. "I shouldn't give stuff away while I'm working."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Bighead Boy," she muttered under her breath. Harry snorted and tried to catch her eye to share the joke. But she had fallen to looking a bit wistfully at her plate, and he knew that she must be thinking of Percy, too. Harry kicked her foot lightly under the table to catch her attention and, when he had it, he grinned and shot a deliberate, sideways look at Ron.

But instead of playing back, Ginny looked up at Harry with such unconcealed surprise that he faltered. He realized that it had been a long time since he had openly joked with her, and he felt himself begin to blush. Just before he felt truly awkward, however, she kicked him back under the table and shot a grin at Ron as well.

Apparently, Ron had witnessed none of this exchange. He gave a satisfied sigh. "So then, that's

me taken care of for awhile. And now that we're all together, Harry here—" Ron clapped a hand on Harry's shoulder as if preparing him for some momentous event—"has some news for everyone as well. Some unbelievable news." Ron turned to Harry expectantly, a gleam in his eyes.

"Really?" Hermione asked, frowning first at Ron and then at him, as if a bit put out that she wasn't in on the secret. "What is it, Harry?"

Ginny leaned forward, chin propped on her hands. "Have you got a job as well?" she demanded.

For a moment, Harry had no idea what any of them were talking about—and then it hit him. The Cannons. He was going to go out for a professional Quidditch team. He grinned at the thought, surprised by how excited he was to tell everyone about his decision, and looked from Ginny's expectant face to Hermione's curious frown, enjoying their anticipation.

"Out with it, Harry," Remus finally said.

Harry turned to face him, drew a breath to say it—and stopped. One seat at the table was still empty, and he felt a pang of unmistakable disappointment. "Where's Sirius?" he asked, though he already knew the answer.

"He's working," Remus answered, his tone controlled.

"With Dad?" Ginny asked at once. "Have they gone back out to Azkaban?" She sounded as worried as Remus looked.

"No, no. Today he's gone to Wales. He thinks he's found a possible location for a new wizard prison."

Ginny frowned. "But they don't even know how they're going to contain the prisoners, so what's the point of that?"

"Excellent question. I suggest you ask Sirius," Remus replied dryly, then shook his head and returned his attention to Harry. "You'll have to tell your news twice, if you don't mind, because now I'm rather curious." He smiled.

Harry shrugged. "It's fine," he said, though he felt slightly less enthusiastic about telling the news without his godfather present. "It's really not a big deal. I just thought I might go out for the Chudley Cannons, that's all."

"Oh, Harry—really?" Ginny gasped.

"Harry, that's wonderful!" Hermione cried.

"NOT A BIG DEAL?!" Ron bellowed. "IT'S THE CANNONS!"

Harry cringed as pain shot through his head, directly behind his eyes. Hermione covered her ears. "Honestly, Ron. We are *not* deaf." But she was beaming at Harry and so was Ginny—both were very clearly pleased about his decision.

Remus, however, looked unruffled by the news. "An admirable plan. But I have to say, Harry, it's not quite news to me—I had a warning on this."

Harry looked at him in surprise. "How's that?"

Remus lifted the newspaper a fraction. "Eloise Midgen's report on you mentioned something about it being a 'possibility'."

"That's out?" Ginny asked at once. "Can we read it, please?" She held out her hand, and Remus handed her the paper. She skimmed the article quickly, with Hermione leaning over her shoulder, then blew out a breath of relief and smiled at Harry.

"It's all right, then?" he asked warily.

"It's fine. It says that you're doing well and enjoying your summer, living with friends and godfather, thinking about what you'd like to do with your life—and then it uses all the things Ron said, to tidy it up. It's really the best article about you I've ever seen. At least it's true." She looked down at the paper again. "Colin's *such* a good photographer," she mused, and Harry watched her, feeling a blush creep back into his face as Ginny studied his image in the paper. She tucked a curl of red hair behind her ear and bit her lip—then seemed to realize all at once whose picture she was staring at. She folded the paper hastily, handing it across to Ron as quickly as she could, accidentally catching Harry's eyes in the process. For a split-second they looked at each other, and then Ginny looked away, quite pink. Harry hadn't seen her flustered like this in a long time and it was somehow reassuring. He watched her for another moment as she busied herself with folding her napkin unnecessarily, and wondered what she would do if he touched her foot again, under the table.

Ron slapped the newspaper open. Startled, Harry blinked at the noise, then craned his neck over Ron's shoulder to see just what Ginny had been looking at. Colin's picture was indeed very good—a black and white image of himself, smiling slightly. Every so often, his photo-self would run a hand through his hair, tossing it up off his forehead. He'd never thought of himself as a handsome person because it hadn't crossed his mind much. He'd always been a bit skinny and untidy, really.

But according to this photograph, Harry reflected, he wasn't so bad. He looked older than he was accustomed to thinking of himself, and even his expression surprised him—the smile in the photo was pensive and guarded. He hadn't realized that everything showed up so easily on his face.

"So when are the tryouts, Harry?"

Hermione's voice brought him back to the table. He shrugged. "Soon, I expect. I think there was something in the paper about it yesterday."

Ron flipped it to the sports section. He read aloud. "Oliver Wood, previously Keeper for the Puddlemere Reserve team and newly-named Captain of the Chudley Cannons, has announced that trials for his team will begin on Monday, July the twenty-seventh. 'Of course I realize this is a month earlier than most teams plan to begin,' says Wood, 'but most teams won't be winning the Quidditch World Cup, now, will they?'"

Harry laughed out loud, and so did the rest of them. "Wood's still out of his mind—I'm going to get run into the ground."

"Well, good," said Hermione seriously, turning to him. "I'm really very glad you're going to do this, Harry. You need it," she added, looking a bit as though she expected him to yell at her for saying so. When he smiled instead, she looked extremely relieved.

Ginny propped her chin on her hands again. "Oh, I don't know about that," she said airily. "Harry, I don't think you need to go out for the *Cannons*—why not wait for a decent team and then try out?" she asked, too innocently.

Harry had to clap a hand over his mouth to keep from spitting out his tea at the look on Ron's face.

"Take it *back*," Ron said warningly.

"Name me a game they've won and I will," Ginny retorted.

"Planning to practice a bit today, Harry?" Remus interjected smoothly, glancing at the Firebolt against the wall.

"That's right," Ron said, still glaring at Ginny as he got to his feet. "And they've won *games*, you know. They just haven't won the league in awhile."

"True," Ginny replied easily. "A hundred and six years *definitely* qualifies as awhile."

"You little—" Ron began.

"We're off," said Harry, hastily, cutting off the conversation so that he wouldn't feel obliged to take Ginny's side of it. She was right, after all. "We're going to that low field for a bit of flying."

"Not yet, you're not," Ginny said, smiling up at her brother with the air of one who was enjoying inflicting torture. "You're washing up—we cooked. That's always the rule."

Ron scowled. "Ginny, first off, you know nothing about Quidditch. Second, you're not Mum, and if you think you can set chores on us—"

"We'll do it," interrupted Harry once more, more interested in getting it done so that they could go out flying, than in having an argument they were sure to lose. He started stacking plates in the air and sending them into the kitchen.

"Thanks, Harry." Ginny stood up and went past him, pausing to lightly touch his arm. "Have a nice practice."

Not meaning to do it, Harry reached up to cover her hand with his own briefly and said, "I will. Thanks for breakfast."

Ginny withdrew her hand after a short pause and went out of the kitchen, leaving Harry quite startled. His heart began to race. How was it that she could affect him so much with such a small gesture? And why did Ron and Hermione have to give each other a look about it? Not that they were the only ones who had noticed—Remus caught Harry's eyes for a moment before shifting his gaze back again to his tea.

Avoiding looking at everyone, Harry got up from the table and went to the kitchen, determined to get the washing finished and get outside. Ron's assistance made it a quick job, and before he knew it they were in the road, broomsticks in hand. Harry's headache had almost evaporated, even as he squinted in the sunlight. He and Ron walked away from Lupin Lodge and were passing the large house on the opposite side of the road, when Ron stopped abruptly.

"Absolutely *not*."

Harry turned at once—the tone in Ron's voice was unexpectedly furious and his friend's face was taut with anger.

"What is it?" he asked hurriedly.

"Look up there, look, quick—" Ron pointed to the third floor balcony on which Harry had seen the man sunning, a few days before. There was no one on it.

"No one's there," he began, but Ron cut him off.

"Through that glass door on the deck. I swear I thought I saw..."

Harry strained his eyes through the glass, but the house was set far back on an impressive lawn and there was a sharp glare on all its windows. It was difficult to make anything out.

"Still not seeing anything—who was it?"

"Malfoy." Ron gave a snort of disgust.

"Malfoy?" Harry repeated in disbelief, feeling his heart sink. He couldn't think of anything more unwanted than having Draco Malfoy cut into the first peaceful summer of his life. "Are you sure?"

But Ron shook his head at once, and resumed walking. "Nah—it couldn't have been him—I know he lives off in that manor of his." He ran a hand through his hair, roughly. "But I'm telling you—it really *looked* like that bastard, for a second. I must be going batty."

Harry considered a moment, then said, "I saw a man on that deck the other day. It might've been him that you just saw—he had blond hair."

"Maybe that's all it was, then." Ron smacked his fist into his hand and exhaled. "I must have Malfoy on the brain, disgusting as that is. Maybe I just *want* to run into him, or something."

"What?" Harry asked, taken aback. "Why?"

Ron looked suddenly murderous. "There are a few things that never got quite taken care of," he muttered. "That bloody son of a bitch. I'll never forgive him for siccing his dad on Hermione's parents like that. Not much I could do about it while we were in school, but I'll tell you if he ever—"

"Ron." Harry felt sick to his stomach and it had nothing to do with his hangover. His voice was very low. "Cut it out."

Ron looked at him, quickly snapping out of his rant, and he shook his head—perhaps in silent apology for having brought any of it up. The two of them walked along quietly after that and didn't speak again until they were up in the air, tossing small rocks past each other in lieu of Golden Snitches, and hollering as they dove to catch them.

* * * * *

Bill regarded his father in frustration. He'd come to troubleshoot with Arthur at the Ministry after another long and incredibly tedious day at Gringotts, during which his wand had been weighed twice and he'd been half-stripped once, for purposes of identification. The London Gringotts guards were no longer taking chances—even now that the Death Eaters had been defeated, high security was still in full effect. And since not all of the goblins in the London branch were accustomed to Bill's presence, they stopped him at every turn. He wondered if it had something to do with his hair—he knew he stuck out a mile. After just a few weeks back at work, he was already sick of protesting that he was a legitimate employee—that he was from the Egyptian branch—that if they'd just check his papers... Bill sighed. He couldn't think of a worse way to end a workday than by having his birthmark verified by very unceremonious goblins.

And it didn't help that he wasn't getting anything accomplished now. It felt that he was prolonging the day to no real purpose—they were no closer to a solution for keeping the Dementors at Azkaban than they had been at first. Arthur had now been sitting with his balding head gripped in his hands for ten minutes, glaring at his desk and muttering somewhat nonsensically.

"Blaming me for this... as if I'm the one who set the Dementors out there in the first place... starting to feel for Fudge, I really am... best way to do it really would be to get rid of the Dementors altogether... especially if we could get that Imprisonment Charm together—then we wouldn't need another guard system... no way to kill those creatures, though..."

"That we know of," Bill interjected. "They're not Immortals."

Arthur raised his weary head and gave a half-smile. "Then why do they live forever? Just because they're not categorized in a certain way doesn't mean we can really kill them. They're resistant to everything, including Avada Kedavra. They're like walking death themselves."

"There's got to be a way to get rid of them," Bill urged. "I'll keep working on it."

Arthur nodded, and sat up straight. "Until then, the thing to do is find another way to keep them at Azkaban. I just can't ask Moody and the rest to stay out there any longer. It's ludicrous, asking them to perform Patronus Charms twenty-four hours a day. Ludicrous. Not to mention that there's no guarantee they can't escape—we lost one once, didn't we?"

Bill felt his stomach lurch slightly. "Not your fault, Dad."

"Then whose?" Arthur asked flatly. "It's just too damned difficult to keep count of them; they keep back in the shadows and blend together. Good thing Moody's got a sixth sense on him when it comes to Dark creatures—" Arthur was interrupted by a sharp rap on the door. "Come in," he called.

Mundungus Fletcher, whom Bill knew to have been heading up the M.L.E.S. since the end of the war, stuck his head around the door and addressed Arthur.

"Another one of these kids," he said, shaking his head. "Young girl. Pretty little thing. What do you want me to do?"

Arthur sighed. "St. Mungo's Children's Home," he replied wearily, sounding as though that answer cost him something. "It's the only place right now, and at least it's got beds and baths and food for them, until we have time to investigate missing persons and locate the parents."

Behind his beard, Fletcher's face was a deep-set frown. "Y'know that they're probably all dead or Death Eaters, Arthur."

"Maybe not all. We'll take the time to check when we have the manpower."

Fletcher looked as though he would have liked to reply, but held his tongue and nodded. "Right. I'll draw up some papers for her, if she'll sit still long enough. Every time I open the door she tries to bolt." He shook his head once more, pulled it back around the door, and shut it behind him.

"Dad?" Bill looked at his father for a better explanation of what had just transpired.

"Orphans. Seems to be a gang of them hiding down Knockturn Alley. More keep turning up. Some because their parents were murdered. Some probably *are* children of the Death Eaters we have in custody." Arthur looked wearier than Bill had seen him since Percy's funeral, though he slapped one hand determinedly on his desk. "One thing at a time. There's an idea Charlie said he wanted to discuss with me about the Dementors. Who knows, maybe he's got something."

"When's he supposed to be here?"

"Half-an-hour ago."

Bill rolled his eyes. Of course. Charlie was notoriously late for everything. "Nice of him to keep his appointments with the Minister."

Arthur laughed, a little. "Now, don't get—"

"Big ideas. I know, Dad." Bill grinned. "I guess it's just throwing me off, how everybody keeps coming to you for permission to do everything. I keep thinking it means you're in charge around here."

There was a small 'pop' behind him, and Charlie's voice came over his shoulder.

"Damn, Dad—that's one gymnasium you Ministry types have got for yourselves. I'll have to watch it or I'll get spoiled. 'Course it's not as fun as riding dragons."

Charlie had Apparated, Bill noted with amusement, straight from the locker room showers. His brother had obviously spent the day hard at play and now he stood in the office of the Minister of Magic with his knapsack over his shoulder and a towel around his waist, his red hair sopping wet. He wore nothing else, save the High-Security Apparition Admissions badge that hung around his neck, and the red and gold scaled dragon tattoo that climbed his right side.

"Charlie," began Arthur dubiously, his eyebrows raised high.

Charlie looked around, then down at himself. He shrugged. "What? I was running late." He stretched from side to side, making the dragon tattoo breathe magic fire across his chest as his muscles flexed, then stuck his wand sideways in his mouth and bent down to grab his robes. "S'riously, Dad," he muttered through the wand, "you should take 'dvant'ge of that stuff down there. 'S'great."

Arthur exchanged a look with Bill as Charlie pulled his robes over his head right there in the middle of the office.

"Too much time in the company of wild animals," their father muttered across the desk. Bill chuckled. Charlie was certainly the least tame among them, and in a family that wasn't exactly low-key to begin with, that was saying something.

"What's that?" Charlie asked good-naturedly, settling himself next to Bill with a satisfied exhale. "Right. Ready for a meeting."

"So glad you could join us," Bill remarked.

"What's this plan, then, Charlie?" Arthur leaned forward on his desk attentively and Bill watched his father's face with some concern. All the Ministry's current struggles were really wearing on Arthur Weasley—but this one was particularly crucial and Bill knew that his father was taking personal responsibility for seeing that that Azkaban was set to rights.

"Well." Charlie patted his knapsack as though it contained vital information. "An assistant of mine had sort of a brainwave. What do you think of trying out a couple of dragons?"

Bill and Arthur stared at Charlie blankly.

"Dragons." Arthur pushed his glasses up on his nose. "In terms of..."

"In terms of guarding Azkaban. Keeping the Dementors at bay. What d'you think?"

Bill snickered. He couldn't help it. It was an immature reaction, but he'd had a long day and this was really too much.

Charlie looked at him as if a bit offended. "What?" he demanded. "It's a good idea."

"You think dragons are a good idea for everything," Bill muttered, still laughing a little. "You'll be telling me they're good babysitters, next."

Arthur chortled.

Charlie narrowed his eyes and pushed his wet hair off his forehead. "For your information," he shot at them both, "dragons have a force field around them—natural energy, like."

Bill put up his hands in silent appeasement. "Of course they do."

"They *do*—and you can hang up the wisecracks. My assistant's drawn up a sort of proposal on the whole thing—a dragon's force field is made of the same stuff as a Patronus Charm, for the most part—it's like a sort of... impenetrable energy... Dementors can't affect it with their depression. Hell, I can't put it right, she put it a lot better than that. Hold on, I'll read you what she said." Charlie bent his head and began to rummage in his knapsack.

Bill couldn't resist. "She?" he asked politely. "Is this your *assistant*, then?"

Charlie stopped moving for a fraction of a second. Bill could see the back of his brother's neck go pink.

"Yeah," Charlie answered momentarily, continuing to rummage.

"Anyone I know?" Bill asked suggestively, enjoying the fact that Charlie was clearly unwilling to talk about whoever it was. Charlie was usually a loudmouth about women—with Bill anyway. Getting him nervous about something personal was a definite rarity.

Charlie didn't answer; he merely fished out a roll of parchment. Bill deftly made a grab for it, but Charlie leapt to his feet and handed the parchment over to his father.

"S'all right there, Dad," he said, obviously making an effort to keep his voice even. "Hope it helps."

"What's the girlfriend's name, Dad?"

Arthur scanned the parchment, found the name, and opened his mouth.

"Not a girlfriend. And that's my business," Charlie said flatly.

Arthur's mouth fell shut. He looked at Bill apologetically, but Bill shrugged, half-smiling. He'd drag it out of his brother later, there was no question in his mind.

Charlie gestured to the parchment, slinging his knapsack over one shoulder as he did so. "So if you want to test her theory, after reading that, I'll have Mick go back and harness two of the Welsh Greens. They're the only ones we were able to tame enough to fly, during the war. Just let me know." He shot a slight glare at Bill. "Going back to the flat?"

Bill nodded. "I don't want to Apparate, though—mind walking? I've been cooped up all day with those bloody goblins."

Charlie shrugged. "See you, Dad."

"Night, boys." Arthur waved to them without looking up from the proposal. Apparently whatever Charlie's assistant had written on that parchment, it was worth a second thought. Bill shrugged. Maybe the dragons would end up being useful to the purpose after all. He didn't get a chance to say this out loud, however. As soon as they were out in the Ministry corridors, Charlie barked at him.

"It's a good idea."

Bill groaned inwardly, and made a mental note not to crack on dragons any time in the near future, as Charlie continued to drill it into him.

"It's a damned good idea, and the dragons do have that energy, I'm telling you—don't you remember? That's why it took so long to hide them during the war—their energy kept interfering with whatever Diversion Enchantments that witch tried to put up around them."

Bill jumped.

He hadn't had his old nightmare since moving back to England, but at the mere mention of Diversion Enchantments, Bill conjured an immediate mental image of the witch that had cast them. He tried to shake it, found he couldn't, and gave in to the memory for a moment. It wasn't that he wanted to dwell on her face so much as that he couldn't help it. It helped, at least, that the memory of that incident didn't frustrate him anymore. Too much time had passed. She wasn't real to him now so much as a dream; he hardly thought about her except in sleep. Still, arrested by the unexpected reference to that night in the trench, Bill wound unseeingly down the rest of the corridors, and he was only half-listening to Charlie's continual prattle about the dragons as the two of them walked out of the building's grand front entrance and into Diagon Alley.

Bill was so lost in thought that the next event nearly caused him to tumble headlong down the Ministry's massive and crowded front steps. He felt a shove against his back, and a moment later, a school-aged girl with tangled hair that might have been blond if it hadn't been filthy had forced her way between himself and Charlie. She didn't stop to apologize, nor did she look behind her—but simply bolted into the street and went careening toward Knockturn Alley.

Sufficiently snapped out of his reverie, Bill watched her go, feeling oddly pulled to follow. Not until he had lost sight of her did he realize that the girl was probably the same orphan that Mundungus Fletcher had been talking about in his father's office, earlier on. It seemed she had indeed managed to claw her way out of having to go to the Children's Home. Bill craned his neck, wishing he'd reacted more quickly—but she had disappeared from view. Bill sighed, knowing that it was only a matter of time before Fletcher picked her up again. He couldn't help imagining Ginny at that age and wondering what she would have done if their parents had been taken from her.

Charlie rubbed his elbow, where the girl had knocked against it. "What was that about?" he muttered.

Bill sighed. For the rest of their walk to the flat they shared, he explained to Charlie everything he'd heard in the Minister's office that afternoon. By the time the two brothers arrived at their makeshift home, they'd had a few words about the state of the world, and neither was in a mood to banter about dragons any longer. Bill didn't even feel compelled to prod Charlie about his mysterious assistant. At least—he grinned to himself—not at the moment.

They pushed open the door to find Charlie's fellow dragon keeper, Mick O'Malley, sitting in the middle of the floor, grinning into the box that sat in his lap. Around him there was evidence of packaging, which he'd strewn around wildly, as if in a hurry to get to whatever was in the box. He looked up as they entered.

"Look here!" he greeted them, excitedly. "Look who's sent me an import from *Australia*."

"No way—" Charlie dashed across the room and stared down into the box. "Oh, now that's *brilliant*," he cried. "Did Stillwell send you these?"

"He did that," Mick replied happily. "I've been wantin' to get my hands on some of these ever since—"

"He smuggled that boxful into the keepers' training camp," Charlie finished, dropping down on the floor and reaching into the box. "Yeah, so have I. That was ruddy hysterical."

Bill watched all this with mounting curiosity, and yet he was unsure whether or not he wanted to know which highly lethal Australian creature was living in that box. Charlie was almost as bad as Hagrid had been, when it came to crossing animal life with common sense. Raising his eyebrows and bracing himself for some small terror, Bill took two long steps across the room and looked.

"Billywigs," said Mick reverently, lifting the jar out of the box so that Bill could see it.

Indeed they were—there were a half dozen of the little stinging beasts crawling all over each other inside the glass. Bill laughed out loud, and shook his head ruefully at Charlie.

"I won't say a word—except if Dad ends up calling on you to get your dragons together for Azkaban, and you're sitting around all stung up on these things—"

Charlie balked. "I don't get stung *up*. I just think they're interesting. And don't you go acting all high and mighty—I've heard wild stories about the kinds of stuff you can get your hands on in Egypt."

Bill deigned not to reply.

"Are we goin' back to Romania for a couple o'dragons, then?" Mick asked Bill keenly.

"Don't know yet," Charlie mused, taking the jar from Mick and watching the Billywigs with a fascinated eye. "My dad's reading the proposal, anyway. So I'll guess it's a yes. It's a damned good proposal."

Bill was on it in a flash. "Who sent that proposal, Mick?"

Mick looked up, a wicked gleam in his eye, and opened his mouth.

"Hope you'll enjoy riding Flatulo on every assignment for a year," Charlie interrupted evenly. "I can do it, too; don't forget which one of us is the supervisor."

Apparently Flatulo wasn't the dragon of choice, because Mick's mouth clapped shut again. He shrugged at Bill. Bill shrugged as well. This was getting more and more interesting.

* * * * *

The sun was crawling toward the horizon by the time Ron and Harry came down out of the sky. Both boys had been too excited about flying to come home for lunch—they'd popped into a shop in the village and eaten something completely unhealthy, then returned as quickly as possible to their brooms. It had been a great day, spent in a low-lying field far out on the other side of the town, which Harry had discovered on his first morning in Stagsden. They were sunburnt and sore, and their throats ached from hollering—Ron couldn't remember the last time he and Harry had been able to fly like that. It had literally been years since they'd spent so much time outdoors together without the fear of being discovered. It was really nice to mess around like a couple of normal blokes, Ron reflected. It was strange, maybe, and new—but he found it easy to get used to, and he hoped that

Harry would as well.

"Do we need to stop for anything else?" he asked, as they passed the last shop and made their way toward the other end of town, and Lupin Lodge. Harry shook his head in reply— they had already bought several bottles of butterbeer, a sack of owl treats, and so many snack items that the shop owner had stared at them. Ron hefted the grocery sack in his arms. In two hours, he'd be a working man, he thought happily. He was looking forward to cleaning up, eating something, and getting back down to the pub.

But his thoughts darkened slightly as they approached the cottage and he slowed his stride a little, letting Harry pull ahead. He wanted to take another look up at that house across the road, and he didn't want Harry to see him do it. Not that he thought Malfoy was really around, Ron told himself uneasily. But whomever it was that he'd seen earlier might have been Malfoy's brother, unless it had been a trick of the light. Ron strained his eyes across the lawn and shifted his gaze along the many windows of the large estate.

Seeing nothing, he quickly turned back before Harry could say anything, and followed him up the steps into Remus's house. They walked through the hall and straight to the kitchen, where Ron dropped the sack on the countertop and sighed with contented exhaustion.

"I'm parched—butterbeer, Harry?"

"Yeah, all right."

Ron reached into the bag for two bottles, and together, he and Harry went into the sunroom, where Hermione was reading in a chair.

"Hello," she said when they came in. She kept her eyes on what she was reading, and Ron thought she sounded a little subdued. "Did you have a nice time?"

"Yeah," he answered, lightly tugging a bit of her hair. "What did you do all day? Wait, no, let me guess." Ron dropped back onto the sofa and grinned at her. "You studied Apparition until you couldn't stand the fun anymore, and then you did a few Charms, just for a bit of summer relaxation, and then, to top it all off, you settled down with a nice big book called—?"

"*Arithmancy for Life II: More Practical Applications*," she answered, still not looking up from the page.

Ron sighed heavily. "You know you're a lunatic—I don't have to tell you."

Hermione looked up at him, but offered no rebuttal. "You look sunburnt."

Ron felt his nose. "I am," he replied, cracking open his butterbeer and making room for Harry to sit down. "You tired, or something?"

"No."

"Well, what then?"

Hermione shut her book and folded her hands on top of it. "I have to tell you something," she said quietly. "And I don't want to tell you."

Ron painfully gulped his mouthful of butterbeer. His only thought was that she had accepted one of her job offers, and that she'd be leaving. A few days before, Hermione had mentioned something about taking an apprenticeship off on some island, and though she had seemed honestly interested in it, Ron didn't want her to go. He'd tried to hide his dislike for the idea, but it had been clear enough to both of them. He hoped she wasn't about to tell him that she'd decided to take the apprenticeship anyway.

"What's the matter?" he forced himself to ask, as beside him, Harry started to get up.

"And where are *you* going?" Hermione asked, raising her eyebrows at Harry.

"Well," said Harry, a bit awkwardly, "isn't this something between the two of you?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. It affects all of us. Just... please, when I tell you, don't get upset—I couldn't stand it." She looked at Ron imploringly. "Don't get upset," she repeated.

Certain, now, that she was about to announce her departure, Ron gritted his teeth and nodded. "Go ahead, you can tell us," he said, his voice low. He gripped his butterbeer and waited for it.

Hermione drew breath, and looked at her hands. "I saw Draco Malfoy today. Apparently he's staying across the street, in that big house."

Ron sat up, stunned. "What?!" he asked, turning to Harry in disbelief.

Harry was pale. "You were right," he muttered to Ron. "You knew it. You saw him."

"You saw him too?" Hermione asked immediately, leaning forward.

"I thought I did—but I figured I was just seeing things. I *must* have been seeing things. Hermione, are you sure you saw him?"

"Yes."

Her answer was so swift that Ron felt certain they must have spoken. The mere idea of Malfoy speaking to Hermione made him want to curse something.

"Don't tell me he came near you, or I'll—"

"Don't!" Hermione's eyes opened wide in alarm. "Don't get upset, oh, please—this is why I didn't want to tell you." Hermione looked anxiously at Harry, and then back to Ron. "He didn't say a thing to me, he didn't come near me—I only saw him from the road. Ginny and I were going to come and watch you fly for awhile. While I was waiting for her outside, I looked up at that house and Malfoy was there on the top balcony."

"Does Sirius know he's there?" Ron asked, his voice low.

Hermione shook her head. "Sirius hasn't come home all day."

"Well, who lives in that house?"

"I don't know."

"Didn't you ask Remus?"

"I couldn't, he went out to Wales right after you left—Sirius thinks he's found a place for the new prison and he wanted Remus's opinion. It was just Ginny and me."

Ron felt the hair raise on the back of his neck at the thought of Hermione and Ginny by themselves, with Malfoy across the way. Draco might have been an idiot and a coward, but that had never meant he wasn't dangerous.

"Did you just spot him and come back in, or did he see you, too?"

Hermione inhaled, a little shakily. "He saw me. I think we must have stared at each other for a full minute—and then he finally went inside." She continued in a whisper. "It was so strange. He was the last person I expected... It was so out of context... And I think he was as surprised to see me as I was to see him. I kept waiting for him to pull his wand, and I was ready to pull mine—I still felt like I ought to arm myself. It reminded me—of everything."

She sniffed, barely, and for the first time that evening, Ron noticed that there were light, puffy rings under Hermione's eyes, as though she might have been crying. Every muscle in Ron's body clenched on edge—his impulse was to cross the street now, pull his own wand, and have it done with. Malfoy was just like his father, and his father had caused more destruction against the Weasley and Granger families than any of Voldemort's other supporters. Lucius Malfoy had climbed as high as Pettigrew in the ranks of the Dark army, and his son had as good as announced his intention to follow in his footsteps. In Ron's opinion, that was too close to being a Death Eater, and if Draco Malfoy wasn't dead, then at least he ought to be locked up in Azkaban.

But just as he was about to say something to this effect, Hermione seemed to sense it. She shook her head and reached out to stop him, so beseechingly that Ron bit back his anger. Wanting to comfort her as much as he could, he pushed off of the sofa and crouched before Hermione's chair, taking her hand in his.

"Are you okay?" he asked putting his other hand on her knee.

She nodded. "Of course I am. It's only Malfoy. We went to school with him for how long?" She gave a hollow little laugh. "And he came off worse than we did, in the end."

Ron shook his head, not wanting to say too much. "But your parents," he managed.

"No." Hermione put a hand on Ron's shoulder and shook her head firmly. "His father did that, it wasn't Draco. And his father is dead. At least I haven't definitely lost my parents. Who knows—there might be a way, someday..." Hermione trailed off and sank back in her chair, looking over Ron's shoulder to smile briefly at Harry. "Now, you both have to promise me that there isn't going to be any of your schoolboy-fighting. I don't want you going out and giving each other boils or fur." She tried to laugh.

Ron looked around at Harry, who had remained silent throughout their exchange. He was ashen.

"Of all the places he could have ended up," was all that Harry said. And then, looking very weary, he rose and left the room, leaving his butterbeer on the table behind him.

Ron watched him go, and Hermione sighed unhappily. "For Harry's sake," she said softly, "I wish things would stop happening. Just when he makes a decision to do something healthy with his life... it's unfair. Ginny was so upset when I told her whom I'd seen."

Ron lifted his eyebrows. "Ginny knows?"

"Why wouldn't she?"

Ron shrugged. Ginny had been involved for a long time in their circle of friendship and in all of their troubles—Ron just tended to forget it, sometimes. In his mind, much as he loved his sister, he was accustomed to thinking of it as just the three of them. "You said she was upset?"

"Only because it might be hard for Harry. She cares for him so much."

Unsure of what to say about that, Ron ignored it. "What about you?"

"What *about* me?"

"Are you sure you're all right?"

Hermione nodded. "I'm fine, I'm fine." She smiled, unconvincingly. "You really are sunburnt, you ought to use the sunscreen—it's not just for the lake, you know." She reached out a finger and traced it across his cheek.

Ron shut his eyes, enjoying the sensation of Hermione's fingertip drawing the lines of his face. "No point in using that unless you're there to help put it on me."

Hermione did laugh a little at that. "You're awful."

"You like me awful." Ron opened his eyes.

Hermione looked at him for a moment, then leaned down and kissed him softly. "Goodnight, Ron," she said, her voice still subdued and quiet.

"You're going to bed? Hold on—it's not even six!"

"I know. I'm just tired." Hermione got up, touched his hair, and went out of the room.

Knowing that her sudden fatigue was entirely due to the fact she'd spotted Malfoy, Ron had another impulse to cross the street and retaliate. But he wouldn't use his wand. He just wanted to land one square punch and hear one good crack. He swigged the rest of his butterbeer in silence, exhaled loudly and got up, meaning to have a quick shower and then take a long, slow walk to work—right past that big house.

Ron showered. He changed clothes in his dark bedroom, where Harry lay on his bed facing the wall with the shades down, pretending to be asleep. He went past Hermione's door and called out a goodnight, but she didn't answer. And then, remembering that none of them had put away the things they'd brought home from the village, he returned quickly to the kitchen to do so, before going to work.

"Hey, Ginny." His sister was in the kitchen, sitting on the counter and eating a sandwich.

She tilted her head to the side and appraised him. "You're all clean. Where are you going?"

"Work. When am I not clean?" he asked, lining the butterbeers up along the countertop and beginning to unload several packets of Cauldron Cakes, pumpkin pasties, and F&G's Unbeatable Crisps "You Literally Can't Eat Just One! Go On and Try!".

Ginny laughed at the last item. "Fred and George are so weird," she muttered. "I don't know why you bought those—they'd've sent you a box free. Plus, you really *can't* stop eating them, you know. It's just not right, what those two do to food." She pointed at the growing pile of sweets and snack food. "And is that what you call dinner?"

"So?" Ron tore into a pasty and tossed the rest of his purchases pal-mal into a cabinet. "You're seriously turning into Mum. Get off the counter."

Ginny laughed and remained where she was. "I had a letter from Mum today, actually. She says—" she cleared her throat and imitated their mother with incredible precision—"Charlie and Bill come home for dinner with your father every few nights now, and Ron certainly ought to do the same once he's passed his Apparition tests!"

Ron groaned. "In her dreams," he grumbled. "Though Hermione'd like it. Move, come on. I have to put these owl treats behind you."

Ginny shifted slightly. "Hey—d'you want company, going to the pub? First night on the job and all? I'll walk you down."

"Yeah, sure, that'd be..." Ron stopped. He had forgotten that Malfoy was across the road. He didn't want Ginny coming back home by herself late at night. "Damn it," he muttered.

"What's wrong?"

"You can't come with me."

Ginny lifted her chin slightly. "Oh? Why not?" But she knew why—the expression on her face told Ron that she was well aware of his reasoning.

"It's not safe," he said shortly, stuffing the owl treats into the cabinet and crossing his arms.

"Don't tell me it's because of Malfoy?" Ginny rolled her eyes. "Please. I could take him." She jumped lightly from the counter, pulled her wand, and assumed a position of mock-attack.

Ron didn't find this at all amusing. "Listen, until we find out what he's doing here and why he's spending his summer right across from ours, I don't want you—"

"What? Going outside? Walking around? Having fun?" Ginny breezed past Ron as she spoke. "I can take care of myself, thanks very much. I've had plenty of practice and I'm excellent with hexes."

"Ginny, we're talking about Dark magic here, hexes are hardly—"

"You think I don't *know* what we're talking about?" She stopped in the door and let out a breath of disgust. "Honestly, Ron. I was in that war the same as you. Get that in your head." She tossed her ponytail. "And I'm walking you down to the village whether you like it or not, because we need to have a talk about Hermione." With that she pivoted, walked down the hall, and went out the front door.

Ron caught up with her in the road, and together they began walking toward the pub. "I'm not having a talk with you about Hermione."

But Ginny wasn't listening; she had turned her face up to the house across the street and was watching it curiously. "When Hermione came upstairs, she said you had already seen him today," she mused. "Did you?"

"What, Malfoy? Yeah, I did. Through that window." He pointed to it, but it was empty now, and so was the deck. He shifted his attention back to Ginny. "Hermione talked to you when she went upstairs? Was she okay? Is she all right?"

"Oh, so you *do* want to talk about her now?"

Ron fell silent, chagrined.

"The thing is," Ginny continued, once they had passed the house without incident. "It really doesn't make a difference whether Malfoy is here or not."

"What?! How can you say that?"

"Well... why are you so upset about him being here?"

"Because it's bothering Hermione!"

"Why is it bothering Hermione?"

Ron threw up his hands. If Ginny had been there for everything, she certainly seemed to be forgetting a lot of the details. "Because his foul father as good as killed her parents! Ginny, seriously, any one of us has a right to go over there and kick Malfoy's—"

"No, Ron, that's not true. *You* blame Malfoy for what happened to her parents. Hermione doesn't. Hermione's upset because she's worried that you're going to hurt Malfoy and get arrested. She cried all afternoon; she was so afraid to tell you that she'd seen him because she knew you'd do something rash, and get taken away. She said she could stand anything except for that."

A hush fell between them, and Ron didn't answer for a moment.

"She said that?" he finally asked quietly. He felt a sudden, strong determination never again to fight with Draco Malfoy, for any reason.

Ginny nodded. "She did. And I shouldn't tell you, but you need to hear it."

Ron scowled a little. Even if Ginny was right, it was still obnoxious to hear advice on his love life from his little sister—and she clearly wasn't finished dispensing it.

"Here's what I think," she continued. "If you promise her that you'll ignore Malfoy, then she won't care at all that he's across the street, because she won't be worried about you going after him. And if Hermione isn't bothered, then you probably won't be, either."

Ron glanced sideways at Ginny. Every once in awhile, he didn't have an answer for the things she came up with.

"But what about you?" he asked slowly. "Aren't you upset that Malfoy's butting in on our summer?"

"I just wish that Harry could have a little peace," Ginny answered, giving a tiny sigh that did not escape Ron's notice. "But no, I could care less what Draco Malfoy does. I feel sorry for that whole family."

"Pretty sad lot, aren't they?" Ron snorted. "Except for Lucius."

"No. Especially Lucius."

Ron turned to Ginny again, incredulous. "You can't seriously feel sorry for that bastard."

"Why can't I?"

A thousand answers flooded Ron's mind. Lucius Malfoy had given Ginny the diary that had possessed her and Petrified Hermione. Lucius Malfoy had stood by and watched while Voldemort had inflicted terrible pain on Harry and tried to take his life. He had been involved in Ron's own kidnapping, in their seventh year. He had tortured Hermione's parents and helped to kill Hagrid—to say nothing of Percy. And not even three weeks ago, at the very end of it, Lucius Malfoy had attempted murder on their own father. There was nothing pitiable about a man who could do all that.

"He nearly killed Dad," was as much as Ron could bring himself to say.

Ginny nodded. "I know it. But his curse came back on him, didn't it? Right out the back end of his wand." She shivered. "He killed himself right in front of his own son."

"He deserved it."

"I know. That's what's so sad."

They were quiet again, lost in their separate thoughts for a little while, until they came into the village itself, and headed for the pub.

"Nervous?" Ginny asked, elbowing Ron a little.

He feigned an injured look. "Me, nervous? Hell no. How hard can it be, anyway—I take a bottle, I empty it into a glass."

"There's probably a bit more to it than that."

"Nah. I'm not worried." He shrugged, and came to a stop. They were outside the wooden door of the Snout's Fair, standing under a sign that depicted a handsome profile of a man with a tankard raised to his lips. "Wish Hermione hadn't been so tired," Ron said with a sigh, watching the sign swing in the summer breeze. "She was going to come down here with me."

A moment later, Ron felt Ginny tuck her arm into his.

"Want me to stay a bit instead, and watch you screw it up?" she asked, smiling. "I'll test your drinks, if you like."

Ron didn't mind the idea at all. "Stay the whole shift," he offered.

"All right. Anyway, I wouldn't want you walking home past the big scary Malfoy house all by yourself."

Ron couldn't help a laugh at that. "Watch it, or you'll be walking back with Jelly Legs."

"You dare and I'll turn your shirt into a spider."

Ron tickled her. Ginny pulled her wand. A small scuffle ensued outside the door of the Snout's Fair, but no real damage was done and no spiders appeared. In fact, neither of them was able to do anything much except laugh, and at the end of it, Ron felt much better. He smoothed his hair quickly, before pulling open the door.

"Reporting for work," he said, grinning, and feeling glad, for some reason, that Ginny would be there to see it. He looked through the door and saw Goldie standing behind the bar. The older man waved at him in welcome, and Ron was pleased to note that he already felt right at home. He turned to Ginny. "After you," he said grandly, and motioned her into the pub.

The Authors' Notes: Thank you to all our beta-readers but especially to Honeychurch, who was of great assistance during the writing of the last chapter, and whom we forgot to thank at that time. Thank you again, Jedi Boadicea, for the lovely Bill you've written in your own stories—he continues to inspire. Thanks also to Cap'n Kathy, for suggesting that perhaps when dealing with wizarding snack-food, "Bet You Can't Eat Just One" isn't an idle threat. This chapter is dedicated to the fearless girls of SQHQ, who all deserve tattoos and loincloths and red hair in excess.

— CHAPTER SEVEN —

Culparrat

The Apothecary's laboratory was situated on the main street of the small village, although calling it a "street" was a bit of an overstatement. Remus Lupin had never actually seen the outside facade of the building, preferring to Apparate directly inside, in front of Mr. Jenkins's counter. The old man lived in two rooms above the shop, and was almost always to be found standing in his work area, managing two or three potions at once.

Remus was a bit later than he would have preferred this evening. He had not wanted to draw attention to himself, and had merely left a note for Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny saying that he would not be home for supper. None of them had seemed to notice the circles under his eyes and his short temper in the past week, and he was glad. The last thing he wanted was for them to start worrying about his problems in addition to all of the larger issues cropping up since the end of the war.

He had hoped that they would all have been able to enjoy a "normal" summer together—the kind that he could recall from his own childhood. He hadn't counted on Dementors and he'd tried to block the Death Eaters out of his head. And now Sirius was so busy that he'd barely spent any time with Harry. He'd even been too busy to perform his usual ritual of badgering Remus to let Padfoot remain with him during the transformation. Remus was trying to remain neutral and not bother Sirius about his current work hours, but Harry's disappointment at Sirius's absence from breakfast earlier that week had been evident, and Remus had resolved to say something to Sirius after the full moon.

And then there was the problem of work—as in, he had none to keep him busy. Sirius had been including him in the decision-making process over the site of the new temporary holding prison, and Arthur had been consulting him on a regular basis, but he still had no official title or position or income. Remus remained patient—after all—no one save Arthur Weasley really had any sort of a title at the Ministry these days.

So he had spent a good portion of the week investigating Draco Malfoy's appearance at Martin Lewis's house across the street. Ginny seemed determined not to let it bother her, but Hermione was clearly disturbed by Malfoy's arrival; she had spent most of the week indoors. Ron had been thundering around Lupin Lodge during the day wearing a falsely cheerful expression, while secretly peeking out the window at the Lewis House when he thought no one was looking. Harry spent a lot of time flying but seemed relatively calm over Malfoy's appearance. Then again, Remus reflected, he really had no idea what was going on in Harry's head.

Curiosity and a need to feel useful had driven Remus to Diagon Alley and the Ministry one day to investigate. He remembered Draco Malfoy from class as an intelligent boy with a typical Slytherin mean streak. Certainly the boy had seemed mild compared to his powerful and corrupt father and had thus far escaped any charges for war crimes, despite Lucius Malfoy's reputation and known involvement with Voldemort. He'd discovered that Malfoy Manor had been hit by a curse in the last days of the war in an attempt to destroy Lucius's cache of Dark Arts paraphernalia. The Malfoy home was now undergoing renovation and Narcissa and Draco Malfoy had come to stay with Narcissa's brother Martin. Remus hadn't realized that Narcissa's maiden name had been Lewis; Mad-Eye had provided this last bit of information over a drink in the Leaky Cauldron, winking as he asked Remus why he'd never noticed the attractive blonde growing up across the street from him. Remus had shrugged. He hadn't noticed any attractive blondes because the Lewises had not been the occupants of the manor house in Remus's youth. He told Mad-Eye as much, and left it at that.

The previous owner of that house had been a werewolf...

"Ouch! Watch what you're doing, will you?" Jack Hughes held out a hand to steady himself on

the counter; Remus had knocked into him slightly after Apparating into the Apothecary.

"Sorry," Remus apologized, straightening and looking around the room. Four other men, all looking as ragged and tired as Remus felt, were standing in the cramped space, shuffling their feet as Mr. Jenkins ladled a foul-smelling potion into goblets.

All of these men were werewolves, just like Remus. They were also all wizards. They came from various parts of Britain and, like Remus, Apparated to Mr. Jenkins's shop every morning for a week out of every month in order to drink the Wolfsbane Potion that would make their transformations peaceful. The Potion was extremely complicated to make, and not just any person could be trusted to brew it successfully. There were only a handful of skilled brewers in the country, and many of the werewolves preferred to be alone during their transformations. Most of the werewolves in the room had been regulars at Mr. Jenkins's shop since the Potion was first perfected seven years earlier, and chose to remain in the cellar of the shop on the night of the full moon. Remus had only ever trusted Mr. Jenkins and Severus Snape when it came to the Wolfsbane Potion. The Wolfsbane herb alone was lethal to a werewolf, and terrible things had happened to those who had first volunteered to test early recipes.

Remus hated the Wolfsbane Potion. He hated the smell; it was useless with sugar, and therefore tasted horrid. He despised his necessary dependency on it. Without it, he would turn into a vicious monster that craved human flesh; with it, he became a lethargic, useless beast, who still craved the flesh, but no longer had any energy or desire to act on those impulses.

A short, stocky, youngish man, with very thick dark hair tinged with gray, passed a goblet over to Remus. "Thanks, Liam," he said quietly, and raised the goblet to his lips, trying to hold his breath as he drank the putrid concoction.

When everyone had drained his cup, Mr. Jenkins walked around to the front of the counter and reached down to lift up a trap door. It revealed a very large cellar that contained several small rooms holding potions supplies, and one large room with a stove. Blankets were spread out on the ground.

Remus slowly climbed down the rickety ladder and chose the blanket furthest from all the rest. He pulled a worn book out of his pocket. It was a new tactic—to try to become so lost in a story that he would forget the impending transformation. It didn't entirely work but it gave him something to do.

His mind kept wandering no matter how much he tried to control it. He could hear the other men talking quietly in the room around him. Jack and Liam, he remembered, seemed to enjoy gossiping until the last possible moment, when they could do so no longer. It was slightly comforting to know that there would be others here with him this evening, although it wouldn't be the same as having Padfoot...and Prongs...and... Peter. He preferred now to think of Peter as 'Peter' and not as 'Wormtail' or even 'Pettigrew'. It kept him from growing bitter at the memory of what his school friend had become. Bitterness was futile. Peter was dead. Remus ticked off the list of names that never left his mind. Peter. Lily. James. Severus.

Snape. Severus had prepared the Wolfsbane Potion faithfully for Remus during those last few months of the war. The two of them had never quite managed to have what might be termed a "friendship", although Remus knew that, by the end, they had developed a mutual respect. It was odd, he thought, that they had trusted Peter so much and been rewarded with betrayal... and that Snape, whom they'd all despised, had given them so much, in the end. No one ever would have believed it, back in school. *Sirius* would certainly never have believed it. Remus smiled in spite of his situation, as an involuntary memory entered his head. Shutting his book softly, his thumb inserted in the pages to hold his place, Remus closed his eyes.

He had always enjoyed Potions in school. The practicalities of brewing, stirring, and timing that were involved in the art of potion making appealed to his controlled nature, although he seemed to lack a natural skill for the subject. He'd done well enough to pass the class, despite the fact that they shared it with the Slytherins.

One particularly rainy day following a night of the full moon, Remus had managed to ruin a cauldron. He had been tired and groggy; he and Sirius had encountered a wolf in the Forbidden Forest the night before, and there had been a small scuffle. James had not been joining them as frequently as he used to for their monthly ramblings—he was the Head Boy and would occasionally feel guilt at breaking the rules, although it rarely lasted. Peter had simply forgotten. While mulling over the previous evening's events in his head, and kicking himself for being so foolhardy as to run loose in the Forbidden Forest without both Padfoot and Prongs to control him, Remus accidentally added twice as much hemlock as was necessary for the assignment. The cauldron—quite a nice one that his mother had purchased as a reward for the hard work involved in earning his

Potions O.W.L.–had emitted a slow, whistling noise, and then collapsed inward.

Remus had stared at it, shocked, and rubbed his forehead, not sure where to cast his eyes.

"Is it that time of the month, Lupin?"

Severus Snape was working at the table next to his. For someone who so openly disliked him, Severus seemed to enjoy positioning himself next to Remus in class whenever possible, most likely so that he could shoot sarcastic commentary Remus's way before Nightwood, the Potions master, caught on.

Remus hadn't cared about Snape's comment. It was one in a series of insults that Snape had directed at him ever since Sirius had played that dratted trick on him. He could remember almost laughing at Snape's comment, when a movement on his other side and a loud bang forced him to look up. It was Sirius.

Also tired from their nighttime adventure, Sirius had advanced recklessly on Snape.

"Take that back, you greasy, pathetic excuse for a wizard."

Snape had stared arrogantly at Sirius, not saying a word, and Remus had felt his weariness turn to worry. Sirius was too rash for his own good sometimes. The last thing they needed was for Sirius or Snape to say anything that would alert the rest of the students that Remus was a werewolf. No one, save Remus and Sirius, had heard Snape's original insult. James was now next to Remus, and looked ready to pounce as well, but Sirius had spoken loudly enough for the class to hear, and Professor Nightwood swept towards them, his face contorted with fury.

"Mr. Black! What on earth—? Mr. Lupin? Is that your cauldron?"

Always one to favor members of his own house, Professor Nightwood had given Remus a sharp reprimand and granted Sirius a detention. Snape had escaped the incident with a smug look of satisfaction, and Remus had begged Sirius not to go after him in the hallway when class commenced. Only with Lily's help was a fight averted; the Marauders returned in silence to the common room and the five friends sequestered themselves in the corner that all of Gryffindor recognized as theirs. James was the first to speak.

"I'm sorry, Moony. I should have gone with you."

Remus sighed to himself even now. He could still hear James's tone of voice—it was so *like* James to take the burden entirely on his shoulders, and Remus knew that if he were alive today, he'd be working as tirelessly as Sirius to bring things to order.

"Bastard. Slimy, good for nothing coward..." Sirius had muttered explosively. He had then affected a horrible, effeminate voice. *"Is it that time of the month, Lupin?"*

James had snorted in disgust. *"He damn well knows what time of the month it is."*

"Is that what he said?" Lily's green eyes had narrowed dangerously. *"I would have thought he'd at least respect Dumbledore."*

"Yeah, and nobody's supposed to know what you are," Peter had added, helpfully, *"but if he keeps on, they'll all find out you're a—"*

Sirius had turned to face Peter, amazement written all over his face. *"Shut UP!"* he hissed. *"Are you MENTAL? And by the way, where the hell were you last night, Wormtail? Nice of you to show up."*

"I-I fell asleep early."

"You fell ASLEEP?" Sirius had shouted, moving toward him.

But Lily had stepped between them, and the fighting had stopped before it could even begin. Remus exactly remembered the look on her face. She'd always had the sort of presence that could quiet an army, he reflected—and she'd needed it, with all of them. She'd looked very seriously at Peter, then turned to James. *"Go with him next time and don't bother with rules."*

Remus had smiled at that. *"Some Head Girl you are."*

"That's never been my first priority," Lily answered at once. *"I'd've gone with you if I could. I'll never forgive you four not telling me this from the beginning so that I could help, too. Now you go to bed, Remus, you look really awful. And Sirius, you go too—I know you were up all night."*

"Yes, Mum," Sirius had tugged Lily's ponytail before he followed Remus up the stairs to the boys' dormitories, muttering low and filthy epithets about Snape, and exclaiming aloud whenever he came up with a new plan for torturing him slowly to death.

Remus couldn't remember too much more of what had happened that night. He opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling of the werewolf enclosure, amazed that he could look back with such nostalgic

feelings on his transformation memories. Nights and mornings that should have been the worst ones of his life were colored with the comfort of friendship—in James and Lily and Peter and Sirius he had found not only acceptance, but relief. And later in his life, Snape—who had done his best to make life even *less* bearable for him during each full moon during their schooldays—had finally shown him that same acceptance.

“It’s been a while.”

Remus jolted back to reality as Jack Hughes sat down next to him on the floor. He absent-mindedly scratched behind his ear and nodded. The transformation was soon upon them; it always began with a tingling, itching feeling throughout his entire skin.

“Yes,” Remus answered, smiling a bit. He enjoyed the company of these other men, although he had not grown close to them over the years. He supposed he ought to try to join in their conversation this evening—after all, who knew—he might be coming here once a month for the rest of his life. He didn’t know of anyone else who had the skill and whom he would trust enough to brew the Wolfsbane Potion. “How’s your wife—Anne, is it? And your daughter?”

Jack blushed and grinned, shaking his blond head slightly. “All right,” he answered. “Anne’s still working in Hogsmeade and Brenna’s nearly ten now. She ought to get her letter for school next summer—d’you think Hogwarts will be ready in time for her to attend?”

“Yes,” said Remus, confidently. “Minerva McGonagall estimates that it’s only going to take a year to rebuild. She’d like to see the students back at work next September.”

“That’s good,” said Jack, nodding. “My daughter’s a smart girl.” He smiled, looking very pleased with himself for a moment, and then his face took on a sober expression. “Look,” he said, his voice growing quieter, “you’re quite good friends with Arthur Weasley, aren’t you?”

Remus nodded, and winced as a pain shot through the entire length of his back. Jack coughed and continued in a throaty voice, “Do you know if the new Ministry will be more favorable towards—our kind? Arthur’s well-known for the work he did with Muggle rights under Fudge and well, I could use the work, as could Liam and well, everyone here in this room. We can all get temporary stuff, you know, but...” Jack stood, although not entirely upright, and put his hands on his back.

Remus finished the sentence for him. “It would be nice to be official, wouldn’t it? Arthur’s working on it, but you know, they’ve got to see to the Dementor situation first. He’s assured me that it’s on his list though.” Arthur *had* told him as much, although Remus couldn’t be sure that even the Minister of Magic would be able to convince more narrow-minded witches and wizards in the Ministry that werewolves were trustworthy. He had earned a small amount of respect from his role in the war, but people like his neighbor, Martin Lewis, still turned green at the sight of him.

Jack smiled with difficulty and Remus knew as a dull throbbing began in his own head that they all had very little time left to talk this evening. Before he left for his own piece of the floor, he patted Remus on the shoulder. “Thanks, mate,” he said.

Remus could only nod his response; at this point, words were beyond him. He reached to remove his shoes and every movement was a focused effort. The wolf was becoming active now; Remus felt the cold creeping along his veins to settle just under his skin as it always did, the stinging in every pore, the itch of each individual hair pushing unmercifully through his flesh as he unbuttoned and removed his shirt to make way for the transformation.

“Padfoot...” he muttered, only half-aware that he was calling out for Sirius. It was Moony’s instinct to find Padfoot—even during the years that Sirius had been in Azkaban, Moony had never forgotten Padfoot’s smell, and Remus had used to hate himself for missing Sirius so incredibly, even after the things that had been done to Lily and James. But he hadn’t been able to help it, and Moony had mourned Padfoot at each full moon as if it were a new wound. Remus’s own human pain had been dulled with constant effort and the careful retraining of thought. But the wolf was simpler and the loss of the dog had remained unbearably sharp, because the dog had been his partner. Prongs had been the biggest, the most beautiful, the most impressive to Moony in terms of sheer mass, and Wormtail had been the most deft. But it was always Padfoot that had corralled the wolf, Padfoot that had traveled in step with him, howled with him, played with him, made this wrenching pain almost worth bearing.

Fingers of fire shot across his ribs and Remus contorted, but did not lie down. There was no point in lying down; he’d be thrust forward on all fours in a matter of minutes. The only thing to do was cling to rational thought, *human* thought, for as long as possible. But it was too difficult to think of Sirius. Now that Remus was no longer parted from his dearest friend by Azkaban’s walls, he wanted Padfoot *here*. He grimaced at the incredible cramp that seemed to grip his intestines, and shook his head dimly against the pain. Padfoot wasn’t coming. Those times were over—this enclosure at the apothecary’s was the only choice, now that Snape was dead.

Snape. Remus clung to the thought as his back arched spasmodically and curved forward again.

His head hung toward his knees and he could hear his own labored breathing—but he would hold on to his mind. Snape. Snape had been killed near the wards of Hogwarts on that final day of battle—no one knew exactly how. They had never found his body. They had never found Percy's body. They had never found Peter's body, either. Not that they had ever looked.

Remus felt his kneebones twist and he gasped in agony, hardly aware of the sounds of pain which echoed in the room around him, unable to care if his own were humiliating and raw. *Concentrate*, he ordered himself, but he felt his thoughts spiraling ever further out of his control, becoming more fragmented, more disjointed as the wolf's consciousness overtook his own.

Peter's body. Peter's death—for Harry. He had died for Harry, just like James and Lily. Killed, slain. He had killed again, too, after James and Lily. He had killed Percy Weasley before Percy's information about the Order had been properly verified—he had killed him rashly, stupidly, hoping that his actions would earn him commendation. But it had been the worst possible move, and instead, Peter had been brought before Voldemort to explain why the Death Eaters' best source of information thus far had been disposed of before it had been properly exploited. Realizing his mistake, and in fear of his life, Wormtail had Disapparated and run to Hogwarts... in his Animagus form... and he had scampered into the dungeons to hide...

Remus felt himself snarl in anger, even though his state was already muted by the Wolfsbane, at the memory of Wormtail in that dungeon. He himself had been standing there with Snape as he brewed Veritaserum for the Order... Remus had gone to talk to Snape about Harry, about protecting Harry, about the potion element of the Fidelius Charm... About who best could serve as Harry's Secret Keeper... Not Sirius—too obvious. Not Ron and not Hermione—same problem. Not himself; once a month he was useless. Snape had answered that the most unlikely candidate was Neville Longbottom *"I hardly recommend that you entrust anything so crucial to such a fool, but then again, no one in his right mind would believe Longbottom capable of it. Of course, he may be capable of other things. Pettigrew was, if I recall the situation correctly."*

Remus had been on the verge of cursing Snape for that callous remark, but before he could start in, Sirius had come crashing into the dungeon to find out what in bloody hell was taking so long—and stopped short in the doorway. His face had slackened, his eyes had gone bright, his wand had been pointed at the floor as if Voldemort himself were lying there.

"Apparently they were right to call you a madman, Black," Snape had commented silkily. But Sirius had not been mad. A few well-chosen words and a twist of his wand, and Peter Pettigrew had cowered on the floor before him, shaking, terrified, bloodied at the knees.

Remus remembered his shock. Peter? Here? Now?

"Please—please—you have to help me—" he had stuttered. But Sirius had cast a Muting Charm on him before he could do any begging, and had stood directly over him, wand aimed at his heart.

"Why, Peter. What a pleasure, really, and aren't you looking well? What brings you here?... What's that?... Can't you answer?... Cat got your tongue? Pity. I so wanted to ask you a few questions. About Percy Weasley, for example."

Sirius's voice was so merciless and Peter had trembled so horribly that Remus had actually felt sorry for him.

"Sirius..."

"No, Remus. I'll kill him now. Today. Enough chances have been wasted and enough lives lost. You can help if you like; otherwise, I'm thrilled to do it alone."

"It's murder, done like this."

"I've already been convicted of this murder. I've served time for it. I've been pardoned by the Ministry and now I'll commit the crime if I see a need." Sirius's voice had grown quite soft. *"And make no mistake, Peter. I see a need. Get on your feet."*

Peter had not moved. He had curled up on his side and begun to sob soundlessly within the Muting Charm. His face had been a revolting river of mucus and tears.

"On. Your. Feet."

"Black," Snape had suggested icily, *"he doesn't seem to be responding to your barbaric threats. Kill him on the floor, if you're going to do it this way. Or stop being an imbecile about it and keep him alive."*

Sirius had laughed, a harsh, ugly sound. *"You're the imbecile if you want him alive, Snape. He'd have sold you out to Voldemort in a second if he'd've known what you really were."*

"And I'm certain he did sell me out, the moment he realized my true position," Snape replied smoothly, and repealed Sirius's Muting Charm. *"There. Speak. Tell me, Wormtail, when I fled the Death Eaters and you discovered that Percy Weasley's information was false, who did you blame?"*

Peter had rocked stupidly on the floor; though his voice was restored, he was nearly unintelligible in his fear.

"I didn't blame—Malfoy did—our Master—going to kill me—you ruined our chances—"

Snape had looked on, coldly. *"He's better use to us alive. Give him to me."*

"No way in hell."

"If you have a brain in your head, Black, you'll listen to me now. He may have information in that weak head of his and it would serve us to get it out of him before we dispose of him."

Remus had shuddered. *"My God, Severus. You sound like..."*

"If I sound like Voldemort to you, Lupin, it is only because you have never heard him at his worst. Has he, Wormtail?" Snape had smiled at Peter, barely—a vampiric sort of smile. *"How fortunate that you stopped by. I've just completed a batch of Veritaserum, and I'm sure you'll be willing to help me test it."*

Peter had only shaken so violently that the loose skin of his chins had quivered.

But in silent agreement with Snape's plan, Sirius had flown Peter to the dungeon's classroom desktop, and bound him there, face-up.

"Try this, and do tell me what you think," Snape had said lightly, still smiling, as he held a vial of the newly-brewed, crystal clear potion above Peter's open, sobbing throat. *"We really don't have time for a Cooling Charm, do we, Black?"* Snape had asked mildly, gesturing to the potion, which was still so hot that it steamed in the vial.

Sirius had smiled, grimly. *"No. We certainly don't."*

The Veritaserum had been administered. Peter had screamed in pain.

Remus screamed in pain now—but silently—returning most unwillingly to the present as his legs began to morph entirely into the wolf's legs. His arms slid from their sockets. His vocal chords shifted, his hearing abandoned him, and his tail began to push from the base of his spine, sending him forward onto half-clawed hands, which were not yet quite paws. His face elongated, and as his head began to collapse into the shape of the wolf's, the memory of Peter grew further and further away as the final agonies of transformation wracked his muscles, his bones, his mind. He could barely make out the rest of the scene, barely cling to the final moments of sanity that were left him before the wolf claimed him entirely.

"Tell me your name." Sirius had stood above Peter's limp figure, fire leaping in his eyes. He clearly relished the opportunity to interrogate his traitor.

"Peter Pettigrew."

"Why are you at Hogwarts?"

"I ran away from my Master. He was going to kill me."

"Why?"

"Because I killed Percy Weasley and there was more information to be got from him before he was disposed of."

Remus had nearly gagged at the callousness of that reply. Snape had been entirely unfazed. Sirius had pressed on.

"But why come to Hogwarts?"

"My Master can't get in here. It's the only safe place."

"You knew that we were here."

"I thought that I could hide."

Sirius had laughed. *"Not from me,"* he'd nearly whispered. *"Never from me. Now tell us what you know about Voldemort's plans. Anything and everything you know..."*

Remus could think no longer. His bones shifted into their temporary skeleton, his muscles strapped into place around them, and the last half-inch of unbelievably uncomfortable fur shot through his hide. The memory of Peter's sniveling faded and Snape disappeared from view, and for a moment there was only Sirius's face, Sirius's voice—cold—purposeful—demanding the truth

And then darkness. Instinct. Present. No past, no thought unrelated to this moment, no memory. Moonlight through the bars of the trap, tuning his blood. Footpads on concrete. Sharp sounds—magnified sounds. Cool, soft, muted colors. The unmistakable smell of wolves. The smell of wolves, everywhere—but none among them a friend. None among them a mate.

Nowhere the smell of Padfoot.

Moony whined softly, and curled up to mourn his loss once more.

* * * * *

Sirius Black stood on a craggy rock in the middle of an isolated Welsh bay and stared out towards the sea. Behind him was a cove, hidden from Muggle eyes, and in that cove, rising out of the water, was a castle. The castle was named Culparrat, and it was the location of the new holding cells for those awaiting trial for their involvement in the recent war. It had been underwater for centuries; seaweed still covered its uppermost turrets, and ghosts of sea creatures still roamed its halls.

Standing on the rock, facing the opposite direction, Sirius felt that his mind was empty—everything was clear and simple. A strong wind rustled his dark hair, and made his black and gray robes sail behind him. For a moment, he felt truly, entirely free. A moment later, however, an owl landed on his shoulder, holding out its claw so that Sirius could detach a roll of parchment from its leg. Sirius read in an untidy scrawl,

*Black,
Lunch is over. Get back here, you lazy dog.
M—*

Sirius chuckled. “M” was Mad-Eye Moody, the infamous Auror. Moody must have just arrived from Azkaban, with another transport of Stunned prisoners. With a deep sigh, Sirius turned once more to glance out towards sea, and then, with a ‘pop’, Disapparated off of the rock.

A moment later, Sirius was standing at the entrance of the castle. Several Charms were already in place to prevent Apparating in and out of the building itself. Sirius performed the counter-spells to bypass the ones that he had helped set up, entered the castle, and after several minutes of winding down unlit hallways, he arrived in a damp, moldy-smelling room. A thick man with a wooden leg was pacing restlessly. The dim light in the room made the craggy face even more ominous, and one small, dark eye was rolling around like a marble in his head.

“How many?” Sirius asked Moody, nodding his head towards a doorway, which led into one of the holding cells.

“Eight in this transport,” Moody answered, fixing a gaze at Sirius with his other, normal eye. “We’ve still got four more groups to send out and then all will be clear at Azkaban. I can’t tell you how happy all of us are. I’m getting dead tired of creating a Patronus every half-hour. At least now we’ll be able to push the Dementors inward and hopefully isolate them without worrying about the damage that they may cause the prisoners.”

“Well, I don’t imagine that it’s going to be that much easier to Stun these people every twenty-four hours,” said Sirius, gloomily. “We’ll have to start conducting trials almost immediately.”

Moody said fiercely, “It’s not necessary to hurry too much. A wizard can be Stunned every day for a year and not be worse off for it. Look what happened to me.”

Moody had survived being Stunned for an entire school year by Bartemius Crouch, Jr., a Dark wizard who impersonated Moody and kept him locked up in a cellar. Sirius decided to drop the topic. He headed to the door that led to the holding cells and opened it. The castle was frighteningly silent. The door led to a long corridor and Sirius walked down towards the end with Moody *thumping* along beside him, pointedly *not* looking through the bars in the doors. Finally, at one of the last rooms, Sirius stopped and Moody pulled a piece of parchment from his pocket.

“I’ll need you to verify,” he said to Sirius, squinting at the parchment and clearing his throat.

Sirius nodded, took a step towards the door, and holding out his wand, uttered a spell to open it. After hesitating a moment, he and Moody entered the room.

Eight wizards lay on top of rickety cots lined up against the walls. All appeared to be sleeping soundly. These wizards were among several hundred whom had been accused of working for Voldemort during the war. They were unshaven and their hair looked as if it hadn’t been combed in weeks. That would change soon—members of the M.L.E.S. had gone out and rounded up the house-elves belonging to the accused. Since many suspected Dark wizards came from old wizarding families, quite a few house-elves had

been gathered. Most of them had been found wandering aimlessly and sadly around the houses of their former masters and had been ecstatic at the opportunity to work again. Hermione had suggested paying them, like the Hogwarts elves that were assisting in the rebuilding of the school, but so far, all had refused. The presence of these magical creatures made Culparrat a refreshing and humane change from the deplorable conditions in Azkaban.

Moody began to read names from the parchment as the two of them marched along the perimeter of the room. “Sivershots, Frank—that’s a surprise, that one is. Verio, Rupert—I went to school with

his father, we brought his wife over earlier this morning—you remember?” Moody continued reading from the list while Sirius surveyed each prisoner. Finally, they reached the end, and Moody pulled a quill out of his other pocket and handed it to Sirius along with the list. “Just sign here,” he directed, “you know the drill. We’ll have a series of forms outlining their crimes by the end of the day.”

Sirius was already at the door. He couldn’t stand being in that room—in that cell, with all of those people. He couldn’t believe that Simon Flannery was capable of Dark magic—the two of them had played together as children. And what about the others? Once outside the room, Sirius took a deep breath. “Tomorrow I’ll be in London. Remus has agreed to come with me and meet with the lawyers. We’ve rounded up everyone we can find. I’m hoping that we can start trials next week.”

Nodding, Moody said, “And we’ll have to figure out a way to deal with the Dementors. We’ve got a section of Azkaban set up to try to hold them. We’ve had a few more wizards volunteering to come up and supply a Patronus. We haven’t quite figured out how that’s going to work, but until we find a way to destroy them or keep them at bay, it’s the best solution we have. We’ll have to get it straightened out soon though—if you’re starting trials next week, then prisoners could be arriving back at Azkaban very soon.”

“I just wish we could find a way to keep the guilty ones at Culparrat after the trials. I can’t in good conscience send anyone back into that hell.”

Moody looked as though he disagreed with this line of thought, but merely grunted and took his leave. Sirius headed towards the small room that he had set up as a base station in the castle. He already had four cabinets full of files on each person currently being held at Culparrat. He stretched his arms, threw back his head, took a deep breath, and began carefully looking through the file he had started working on that morning. Knowing that what he was doing was right and just gave Sirius the energy to carry on.

* * * * *

Remus wandered out into the well-tended garden of Lupin Lodge, clutching a letter in his hand. The letter, which had apparently arrived with the morning paper, bore the familiar Hogwarts crest at the top. It was amazingly still outside—although it was nearly eight o’clock in the evening, the day was still bright and warm. He preferred the summer, when the days were long and the nights short. His transformation the night before had been relatively painless. Nothing could stop the feeling of intense loneliness that he felt every time the wolf arrived each month, but the Wolfsbane Potion and the end of the war made it seem a bit more bearable after it was finished. He had Apparated around midday, fallen into bed, slept late, and, as far as he could tell, no one had really paid any attention to this. He was glad, because he didn’t want the teenagers to spend their relaxing summer worrying about him.

Sitting down on a stone surrounded by some rather tall, purple, jungle-like plants, he stretched out his legs and read the letter for the twelfth time.

Dear Remus,

I am writing in the hope that you will consider doing a favor for a former professor and old friend. As you are well aware, we are trying to rebuild Hogwarts in time for it to reopen next year. It is common knowledge that you were considered one of the best Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers that Hogwarts has seen. I know your feelings on returning to this position, and I will not offer it to you again. I would, however, like to ask you to consider returning to Hogwarts as the professor in charge of teaching Care of Magical Creatures. The appointment would not begin until the next school year. Being a magical creature yourself, I find you ideally suited for the job. Please consider the offer.

Warmest Regards,

M. McGonagall

Headmistress

Remus folded the letter again and watched, amused, as a Capperclaw beetle crawled along one of the leaves of the plant that surrounded him. Professor McGonagall was correct in assuming that he’d prefer that post to any other. It was also true that, despite Remus’s role in defeating Voldemort and the new respect that this commanded from people formerly afraid of him as a werewolf, Remus had received no significant job offers since the war. He knew that Arthur would work on repealing the Ministry restrictions on employing werewolves when he had the time, but Remus wasn’t sure that Ministry work would suit him. Right now he was getting by on his savings and the rent that Sirius insisted on paying him. Remus liked to work—throughout his life it had been such a struggle to find employment of any kind that when he did, it always seemed like a special gift. It was hard,

though, to plan for the future when the house was so nice right now, with Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny filling it up, and Sirius...

Sirius. Remus squinted up into the sky, where light from the sun was shining brightly as it slowly began to set behind some clouds. Sirius should be home by now. Remus would talk it over with him. He also needed to talk to Sirius about his rigorous work schedule—a conversation that he really wasn't looking forward to.

He rose, dusted off his robes, and headed back into the house. He saw an orange creature slinking in through the kitchen entrance and knew that Sirius must be home. Crookshanks and Sirius shared a special bond, and the cat almost always managed to be at home when Sirius arrived from work. When he opened the door, he saw Sirius sitting at the kitchen table, elbows on the table, and head clenched in his hands.

"Sirius?" Remus asked tentatively, closing the kitchen door behind him. Sirius didn't look up, but put one of his hands down on the table and continued to stare downwards.

"Sirius, what's wrong?" Remus pressed again, moving to sit across from his friend.

"I'm just tired," he finally answered, stretching his other arm out in front of him and fiddling with the vase of flowers in the center of the table.

"Hard day at work?" Remus asked, feeling that he knew all too well that Sirius was not going to talk to him about this. To his surprise, Sirius sighed and answered simply, "Yes."

"What happened?"

Sirius put his head down on the table and grabbed it with his hands, and then finally lifted it and said, "It's just—the Stunning. I'm not sure that it's right. But we can't think of any other way to keep them all in Culparrat until the trials."

"But Sirius," Remus said rationally, "people can be Stunned for weeks, months even, without any serious effects. And I'm sure that the trials will all be done within the year. Moody was Stunned daily for ten months."

Sirius snorted. "I wouldn't exactly say that it didn't effect Moody."

"He was like that before."

"Yes, but..." Sirius stopped as Crookshanks leapt up onto his lap and began to purr. Sirius stroked the cat's orange fur absentmindedly.

After a moment, Sirius continued, "It's immoral to Stun innocent people like that."

"But you don't know if they're innocent or not. It's part of our legal system."

"Guilty until proven innocent?"

"Sirius—" Remus hoped that his voice sounded soothing, "There's been a *war*. These are supposed *war* criminals—not petty thieves or people who have been accused of turning their teakettle into a frog. There's a danger of Dark magic being used, and Stunning really is the best short-term solution. Would you prefer to have the Dementors guarding the place?"

"No," admitted Sirius truthfully, "but we could set up Charms to keep them in! Muggles don't Stun their prisoners, do they? They put them behind bars. We could do the same, and then place Wards all around Culparrat to keep them in."

"Sirius, I agree with you in theory—but I really don't see how that will work. Think about it. Think about how you escaped from Azkaban—"

"Yes but I was innocent! That's exactly my point!" Sirius stood up quickly and Crookshanks fell to the ground with a thud.

Remus flinched. He had spent years trying to remain calm in the face of confrontation. He replied in a steely voice, "Yes, you were innocent, but you were never given a trial. These people may or may not be innocent, and you are being kind to them by Stunning them until they can defend themselves, rather than locking them away in Azkaban without any defense. Don't you see?" More quietly, he continued, "Sirius, you are doing exactly what you need to be doing, and it's the *right* way. No one would *ever* accuse you of being a hypocrite."

Sirius was now standing and staring out of the window into the garden. Remus stared at his tall, tense form, and thought for the thousandth time about the unfairness of what his friend had suffered—of how he himself had suffered.

It was quiet for a few minutes. Sirius broke the silence with a small laugh, ran his fingers through his cropped hair, and turned to Remus, "Well, never mind about all that. You're right of course. Now tell me—" he walked back over to the table to sit down, "how was your latest transformation? I've been so busy that I didn't ask. You still look a bit tired. You hadn't come back by the time I had to leave this morning."

Remus shrugged, "I go through it every month," he gave a dry laugh, feeling himself choke up a bit for some reason, "with the Wolfsbane Potion, it's really nothing. I just sleep. The transformation

itself is still difficult but the in-between part is much easier.”

“Can’t I come with you next time?”

Sirius was looking straight at him with his deep-set, light blue eyes. Remus opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. He wanted Sirius with him during the transformation, of course he did. But this was his demon, and Sirius was busy with his own problems at the moment. Finally he answered neutrally, “No one but werewolves can be in that shelter overnight on the full moon. And you’re away enough in any case—Harry’d rather you were here.”

As soon as Remus mentioned Harry’s name, Sirius’s eyes clouded over. “Damn it,” he muttered. Then he looked around, blinking, and asked, “Where is everyone anyway? It’s awfully quiet around here.”

“They’re at the Snout’s Fair with Ron. They said that they weren’t going to stay late—just have a butterbeer or two, and then come home. I think that Harry’s learned what he can handle from now on. He’s going to stick to the softer stuff.”

Remus hoped that this comment would lighten up the conversation a bit, but Sirius mumbled, “He’s so much like his father. Lily could drink James under the table. You know, Moony, if I could see both of them right now, I think I’d start a fight. What were they thinking, making me a godfather? Harry is obviously going through some sort of private hell right now and I know no way to help him.”

“Once again, Padfoot, you’re doing what you can. Harry knows it and appreciates it. And whatever he’s going through, really, he’s going to have to learn how to deal with it himself, in his own way.”

“Hopefully the Quidditch will help take his mind off deeper things for a while.”

“Well, you can’t expect him to heal all of his wounds overnight. When a person goes through traumas like he has, it can sometimes take years to sort out, and sometimes it never sorts out at all—you should know.”

Remus was afraid that perhaps he had gone a bit too far this time. Sirius was staring at him intently, in a way that made him both happy and angry at the same time. Airy laughter could be heard coming through the garden, and Remus realized that the sun had now set, and he lifted his wand to turn on a light.

“Do you enjoy sitting in the dark?” Ginny burst into the room from the garden, cheeks flushed and a smile on her face. Hermione followed, with Harry not long after. They looked as though they had consumed several butterbeers. When he saw Sirius, Harry stopped and said with a grin, “Sirius! Did you know that you’re a celebrity?”

Both men looked at Harry blankly, and Hermione pulled the morning’s *Daily Prophet* out from the pile in the corner of the kitchen. “Didn’t you see this, Remus?” she asked, placing the paper in front of him. “Sirius is on the front page.”

Remus looked down at the paper and Sirius walked around the table to stand behind him. There was a black and white picture of Sirius glinting up at them. He was squinting towards the camera, but looked extremely handsome. Harry snatched the paper back from them and began to read, in a loud, exaggerated voice,

Wrongfully accused wizard ensures fair trials for all

Eloise Midgen, staff reporter

Picture by Colin Creevey

The face in this picture bears no resemblance to the long-haired, sunken-eyed convicted murderer who escaped from Azkaban five years ago. Sirius Black is a handsome man, with clear, light-blue eyes, roguish black hair, and, when it shows itself, a boyish smile.

Harry stopped reading and shot a glance at Sirius. “Go on then, show us your boyish smile, old man.” Sirius reached over to smack the back of his head, but Harry ducked. Remus looked on Harry in surprise, unaccustomed to seeing him in such good spirits. Of course, Harry’s lighthearted tone was clearly the result of a butterbeer or two... but that wasn’t the whole of it. Remus looked shrewdly from Harry, reading, to Ginny, who was watching with very bright eyes as Harry continued.

Everyone now knows that he bravely fought with the Order of the Phoenix during the recent war. When the war ended, Black looked forward to spending a quiet summer at the manor of his friend, Remus Lupin,

“You live in a *manor*, Remus,” enthused Hermione, teasingly. “Did you know that?”

and caring for his famous godson, Harry Potter.

"That's me, all right." Harry took a deep breath, and sighed dramatically. Remus had the impression that the three of them had already read the article several times aloud that day, and after a moment, Harry continued.

But it was not to be. Early in the summer, Black was contacted by the Ministry of Magic to help find a way to control the Dementors, who were intent on performing their deadly Kiss on every accused Dark wizard in Azkaban.

Since late June, Black, along with Auror Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody, has been scouting the country looking for a location for a holding cell where prisoners will be kept away from the Dementors before standing trial. The new prison, "Culparrat", is suspected to be located in Wales, although the exact location remains a mystery to all but a select few.

In London yesterday, Black told the Daily Prophet "I was never given a trial. The Dementors almost had me and I was innocent. I will do everything in my power to make sure that each and every wizard and witch at Culparrat receives a true judgment."

Black refused to comment on techniques that might be used to try to determine which wizards were or were not acting of their own accord during the war. It is a well-known fact that Veritaserum is not entirely reliable in determining whether or not an act was performed while under the Imperius Curse.

By this point, Harry's voice had grown quite sober, as had Sirius's face. Remus looked from one to the other of them, wishing there were some way to ease the tension of these issues, and knowing that there wasn't. He was about to interrupt and attempt a change of subject, when Ginny snatched the paper from Harry.

"Don't stop there!" she protested, nudging him slightly. "You're just getting to the good part. Oh, and you may want to grab a tissue, Sirius—this gets to be touching." She grinned and cleared her throat.

Arthur Weasley, Minister of Magic, also will not yet disclose methods that will be attempted to keep the Dementors at bay. His only comment was, "Our goal is to develop a humane way to keep prisoners in Azkaban without using Dementors at all. We're working on it."

Meanwhile, Sirius Black soldiers on and the families of those imprisoned may rest easy, knowing that their loved ones will be tried in a just and moral manner. When asked if, now that the war was over, he planned on starting any sort of family on his own, Black looked suddenly bashful, and told us, "I don't have time for that right now, but I suppose there's always possibility. That's the joy of freedom."

Ginny stopped reading, her hand over her heart. Harry watched her with a smile playing on his lips, while Hermione gave an exaggerated sigh. Sirius looked at the ground, apparently embarrassed, and Remus couldn't help grinning. It was high time that a little of Padfoot's teasing nature came back on him. And before anyone could say anything else, three owls swooped into the kitchen and dropped letters onto Sirius's lap. He looked up, startled.

"I bet I know what those are," said Harry, obviously relishing witnessing someone else in the spotlight. "Fan mail."

Sirius blinked. "You're kidding."

Harry only shrugged, but Remus knew that where fan mail was concerned, Harry had enough experience to tell. He eyed the letters with no little curiosity as Sirius handed one roll of parchment each to Harry, Hermione, and Ginny.

"Go on then," he said, with a careless sigh. "Tell me what they say."

Harry opened the first one. It was very short.

Dear Mr. Black—I like a wizard with principles. If you are ever in Brighton, you are welcome to visit—Lydia Wickham

Harry grinned. "Now you've got a girlfriend at the seaside!"

Hermione opened the next letter. This one was a bit longer.

Dear Sirius,

I don't know if you remember me or not. I was in Hufflepuff at Hogwarts at the same time that you were there in Gryffindor. I was happy to hear about your project in the Daily Prophet this morning. It seems like you certainly have your hands full! I am also very concerned for poor, young Mr. Potter—

"She doesn't even know me!" interjected Harry.

It's good of you to watch over him, but there is nothing like a mother's influence. Only a woman can really provide that kind of nurturing. I would be willing to help.

Sincerest Regards,

Marcia Watkins

Sirius caught Remus's eye and they both erupted into laughter. "She's still got a crush on you Padfoot!" Harry, Hermione and Ginny exchanged puzzled glances. Finally, Remus calmed down enough to explain, "She used to follow us around all the time. Once she tried to put a Love Charm on Sirius in the hallway—several times—but it failed miserably. Didn't work at all. We couldn't understand why she kept running up ahead of us and throwing herself in front of Sirius. Poor girl." Remus shook his head. Marcia hadn't been the only girl to make a fool out of herself in front of Sirius. He seemed to attract them like flies and had developed quite a reputation during his final years at Hogwarts. Even Remus was unsure how much of it was true.

He frowned slightly. Women certainly hadn't been running to Sirius since his escape from Azkaban. There was no denying, however, that publicity like this article in the *Daily Prophet* was bound to bring more and more fan mail Sirius's way. Especially if they kept publishing pictures like that one. Remus glanced towards Sirius in order to see how his friend was dealing with his newfound stardom, but Sirius's face was unreadable. Ginny ripped open the seal on the third piece of parchment.

Sirius,

We started something all those years ago. I would love to continue where we left off. Do you still have that motorcycle?

Gina

Remus opened his mouth in shock and turned to Sirius, who was smirking. Finally, he managed, "Gina Borko?" The *Slytherin*? Sirius, tell me that you never—

He stopped when he noticed that Harry, Hermione and Ginny were staring at him with great interest. Remus felt suddenly very tired. His own first and only girlfriend had been a *Slytherin* at Hogwarts. He had found out that Severus Snape had insinuated to her that Remus was a werewolf. She had come on to him only because of the thrill of dating a "dark creature." Sirius had been furious when he'd found out and had cast a Memory Charm on her, causing one of the largest arguments ever between the two friends. And to think that Sirius had then gone out on a date with a *Slytherin* girl himself? Remus flinched unconsciously and stepped back toward the door.

Sirius looked up and studied Remus's face for a moment as if he knew exactly what was happening in his head. *Which*, Remus thought dryly, *he probably does*.

"I went on one date with Gina Borko," Sirius said evenly, after a moment, "and nothing happened. Not that she didn't try—but in the end, I couldn't get past the fact that she was a *Slytherin*. She wasn't evil though—just—just—" Sirius looked like he was searching for a word but couldn't find one. Finally, he decided upon, "promiscuous."

Ginny and Hermione stifled giggles, and Sirius grinned at them and winked at Harry. Remus didn't feel like laughing. With more effort than he wanted to spend, he gave everyone a weak smile, said goodnight, and headed slowly up the stairs to his room.

The Authors' Notes: This chapter is dedicated to all of the Remus Lupin fans out there. We are eternally grateful to Honeychurch and Lallybroch for providing valuable background information on Remus and Sirius.

More A/N: Thank you so much, B Bennett and Cap'n Kathy, for the excellent beta-reads, and thank you, Hallie, for being AtE's moral conscience. :) And Jedi B, we miss you. Come back from Turkey now, please. Thanks also to Jane Austen for giving us Lydia—a timeless character, who can show up in the strangest places!

— CHAPTER EIGHT —

The Apparition Exam

Ginny didn't mind long stretches of quiet. In fact, she welcomed them. There hadn't been much quiet during her summers at the Burrow, and Hogwarts had never exactly been peaceful, so the fact that she was going to be alone all day didn't bother her a bit. She stretched out on the wooden floor of the front room, and tried to tempt Crookshanks with a bit of ribbon that dangled from her wand-tip. It didn't matter if she wanted to lie on the floor; no one was at home to see her. Sirius was at Culparrat. Harry, Ron and Hermione were off taking their Apparition exams. And Remus was sleeping in for the second day in a row, so to Ginny it was rather like having a house all to herself.

I hope that Remus wakes up soon, she thought, jerking her wand from left to right and smiling when Crookshanks followed obediently with a swipe of his paw and caught the ribbon in his claws. There was a sound of footsteps upstairs, and Ginny checked over her shoulder to see if Remus was coming down yet. She needed to speak to him privately.

It was difficult to work up the nerve to do it. She didn't know Remus extremely well yet, and though he was a very calm, good-natured person, he was also very guarded and somewhat difficult to approach. Sirius had been the easier one to talk to right off—at least, when he was at home. But it was Remus whom Ginny felt like confiding in, and with Remus there was a definite personal space that had to be maintained. Ginny could feel it. The air around Sirius, she reflected, was deep and dark sometimes, but very warm and magnetizing. Around Remus, the air was cool and placid. Unbreakable. Almost blue.

Ginny shook her head and smiled at her thoughts. Air didn't have colors, and she didn't believe in auras—Professor Trelawney's classes on the subject had been tedious and Ginny had never seen the "glow of inner unrest" that Trelawney had ceaselessly claimed shone around each of them. She had seen a lot of smoke while feeling drowsy and overheated. That was all. She rolled over onto her back and Crookshanks immediately took the opportunity to pounce on her chest and curl up. Ginny petted him and scratched his ears.

"Good boy," she murmured in a baby voice. "Good little Crookshanks, good little kitty—yes, you are."

Crookshanks purred appreciatively, and licked her face. Ginny giggled.

"I see you have an admirer."

Ginny craned her head around Crookshanks to smile at Remus, who had appeared at the foot of the stairs, dressed in his usual gray robes. The rings under his eyes matched them and exhaustion seemed to seep from him. Ginny could feel it from across the room—she knew exactly why he was so tired—and that was what she hoped to talk to him about.

"Yes I do," she returned, sitting up and lifting Crookshanks into her arms. He didn't seem to be interested in cuddling any longer though—he pushed off her chest, sprang to the floor and wandered off down the hall, bottlebrush tail high in the air. "Or perhaps I don't," Ginny decided, laughing, and brushing cat hair from the front of her shirt. "What are you doing today?"

Remus yawned, covering his mouth with his hand. "Having tea, first," he replied, smiling. "And then I'd planned to work a little in the garden. I'd like to plant pumpkins this year."

Ginny saw her opportunity for private conversation. "Would you like company?" she asked at once. "I could help, if you like."

"Certainly." Remus looked almost cheerful at the prospect. "I'll be outside in half an hour or so." He yawned again, and went down the hall toward the kitchen.

Ginny got to her feet and went in the opposite direction, through the sunroom and out the back door to the wide, sprawling garden that made up the huge plot of land behind Lupin Lodge, stretching past its hedges all the way to the edge of the woods. Remus's parents had been attentive gardeners, and so was Remus—it was still evident how much care had once gone in to the mainte-

nance of the plants. They were a bit wild and tangled now, from the neglect they'd suffered during the war, but they were still quite green, and very pretty. Having no idea what plot of land Remus planned to use, Ginny sat down to wait, watching gnomes as they scurried beneath rocks and into holes. She hoped Remus didn't want to de-gnome anything today. She hated throwing the poor things, even if they did bite.

Ginny rested her chin on her knees and tried to think of how she would broach the topic that had been bothering her. Last week, she had noticed a pattern. Remus would appear at breakfast, then go missing for an hour. At first, it hadn't struck her as odd—she had assumed he left the table to shower, or to read—but by the fourth day, she realized that he wasn't in the house at all. No one else had noticed this and she hadn't brought it up to them. Harry, Ron and Hermione had been fully absorbed in trying to work out what Draco Malfoy was doing in the house across the road, not to mention that they were all tied up with last-minute Apparition study sessions, which Hermione insisted upon.

But by the end of the sixth day, Ginny's curiosity was piqued and she was ready to ask Remus what he did every morning; she wondered if it was perhaps some kind of exercise. On the seventh morning of the week, she had planned to ask if she could come along—but, to her surprise, Remus had been present at breakfast. He'd been gone for supper though; he'd left a note, and she'd waited for someone else to notice his absence, or for Sirius to say something about it when he came back from Culparrat. But Remus had been gone all night as well, and that night had passed without comment from anyone. When Remus had returned the next morning, however, he had slept in until eleven o'clock, and when he had come downstairs, the skin on his face seemed to hang slightly off the bone.

Ginny had checked Hermione's lunar calendar, and it all made sense. She knew that Remus must have gone away for the night in order to transform into a werewolf. She was only surprised that no one else had noticed.

Sunlight glinted on something off to the right, and Ginny settled her eyes on a small shack-like structure, built of metal. It was more like a tall kennel than anything else, and the three deadbolts which sealed the door were rather intimidating. That must have been where Remus had lived out his transformations, before they had all come to stay at Lupin Lodge. Ginny shivered. It didn't look quite humane. She could hardly imagine Remus allowing himself to be locked inside. She wondered briefly if Sirius was the one who locked him in, or if, perhaps, they still roamed around as Padfoot and Moony on full-moon nights. She knew things about the Marauders, and knew how they had become Animagi, for Remus's sake.

It was so strange to think of someone like Remus Lupin as a werewolf, Ginny reflected, looking away from the depressing sight of the shack and fixing her eyes on the trees. She knew, from the stories she had finally heard, that the Shrieking Shack had been built in Hogsmeade for his use, that he had suffered violent transformations and that, of course, he still became a wolf, once every month. She tried to imagine Remus—calm, contained, rational Remus—howling and snarling like a dangerous beast. It was difficult. She wondered if he went away because he feared that he would hurt them. She wondered what it was like, being a werewolf.

"Ready, Ginny?"

Ginny jumped at his voice over her shoulder, and felt slightly guilty, as if he might have been able to read her thoughts. "Sure," she answered quickly, standing up. "Where do you do pumpkins?"

"Here." Carrying a metal pail, Remus led the way toward a wide, empty patch of rich, dark soil. Clearly, he had already prepared the area for planting—the ground was moist and the dirt had been weeded and turned. He knelt in the soil and drew his wand. "*Perforatus*," he muttered. There appeared, in the empty patch, a line of little holes like cups in the ground. Ginny knelt next to Remus and drew her own wand.

"What was that spell again?"

He repeated it, and she tried it out for herself. "*Perforatus*." But where Remus had created six holes with his spell, she was only able to get two. He smiled encouragingly nonetheless.

"That's very good. You want to concentrate on the line you're creating, when you say it. See it in your mind, as you want it to appear—I find that helps."

Ginny nodded and tried again, holding her wand out over the soil and imagining six cup-like dents of earth. "*Perforatus*."

Three more appeared.

"Well, that's some improvement, anyway," she muttered, feeling irritated that she couldn't do it perfectly, right away.

"Yes, it is," Remus returned mildly, setting the metal pail in front of her. Ginny saw that it was stuffed with tiny bags, all marked with different plant names. She reached in and withdrew the

one that read 'pumpkin', unrolling it in her hand and beginning to distribute seeds into each of the cups.

"I'll do that," said Remus, holding out his hand. "And you can practice making the holes."

Ginny sighed impatiently, but handed Remus the seeds and held out her wand. She tried the spell again, getting just three holes.

"Take a deep breath, and try not to rush." Remus sounded much as he had the year he had been her teacher for Defense Against the Dark Arts. Ginny grinned to herself a little, remembering what a trouble she had been in that class. She took a deep breath, and concentrated.

"*Perforatus*." Five holes appeared, and Ginny squealed happily.

Remus laughed. "Excellent. Do it again."

Ginny held out her wand and continued to practice, attempting to intersperse the spell with conversation. "Do you remember me from class at all?" she asked him.

"Oh, yes. But I see you didn't listen to a word I said—your wrist still turns to the left after all this time."

Ginny straightened her wrist almost imperceptibly, and flicked. "I listened. I just forget."

"You just don't practice."

Ginny huffed. "I practice." She flicked again. No holes appeared. "Damn!" she said hotly.

Remus laughed again. "Yes, I remember you from class. Now concentrate."

Ginny did concentrate, and after half-an-hour, she found that she actually had the rhythm of the spell quite well.

"I've got it," she announced happily. "Can I do the seeds now?"

"Of course." Remus turned the little bag over into Ginny's hands, and they continued to move down the patch of earth, planting seeds together.

"Remus..." Ginny began tentatively, wondering if this was the right moment to introduce a difficult topic. He seemed to be in a welcoming mood. "May I ask you something rather personal?"

Remus's wand paused in mid-air. "You may ask," he answered slowly. "But I reserve the right not to answer. Is that fair?"

Ginny nodded. Of course that was fair. "It's just that last week... in the mornings...." She summoned her voice and cut to the chase. "I know why you were gone the day before yesterday, because I checked the calendar. Where did you go? *Why* did you go? And why were you gone every morning beforehand, for a week?"

Remus lowered his wand altogether and leaned back on his heels. "Ah," he said. For a while he was silent, and Ginny wondered if he would say anything else. But she didn't rush to ask any other questions—she had the strangest idea that he would tell her everything, if she was patient. She didn't know how she knew it, but she did. To pass the time, she planted seeds, separating the dead ones into a small pile on the ground as she worked.

And eventually, as she had anticipated, Remus answered her. If Ginny hadn't known better, she would have thought that he was talking about the weather.

"You've heard of Wolfsbane Potion?" he asked calmly.

Ginny nodded. "Yes, and I know what it does."

"I go to a small town in the north, each month, in order to take the potion so that my transformation will be as... tranquil as possible. There is also a small habitat kept by the apothecary there, in which I sleep while I am in the body of the wolf."

These words made Ginny shiver, but she didn't show it. There was something behind the even tone that Remus was using—something anguished and alarming. He hated being in the body of the wolf. She didn't have to ask what being a werewolf was like.

"That makes sense," she answered steadily, picking out two dead seeds and planting three good ones. "But what about the whole week beforehand?"

"The Wolfsbane Potion is only effective if taken every day during the week preceding the full moon."

"So you have to Apparate there every day for a week?"

"Yes."

"How tedious." Ginny wondered if she shouldn't have said that, but Remus laughed at her candor.

"Yes. Yes, it is."

Encouraged by his tone, Ginny continued. "But there must be someone nearby who can make the Wolfsbane Potion? What about you? What about Sirius? What about the apothecary in the village?"

Remus shook his head. "It is possibly the most complicated potion I have ever come across," he said, a bit sadly. "Severus Snape was the only wizard of my acquaintance whom I trusted to make it." Remus grew quiet for a moment after that, and his eyes turned inward as if watching a scene. Ginny waited. She knew it must be difficult for him to think of Snape. It was impossible to truly accept the loss when the body went unrecovered, she reflected. She still prayed that Percy was only missing, though she knew it was futile, and she imagined that Remus must wish the same for Snape.

"He was a very intelligent Potions Master," Ginny said quietly, after a pause.

"He was, quite literally, a genius with Potions—though we never said it to his face." Remus smiled wryly. "In any case, I'm unable to manage the Wolfsbane Potion with any degree of consistency. And Sirius doesn't even want to try."

Ginny frowned. "Why not?"

Remus started, as if he hadn't meant to say as much as he had, and then looked at her appraisingly for a moment. "I think I'll reserve the right not to answer that one," he said lightly. "Suffice it to say that we'd rather not have any mistakes made. I want the transformation to be simple and non-violent for everyone involved, and if that means going away, then that is what it means."

"You're fighting with Sirius, aren't you?"

Remus gave Ginny a long look, one that made her decide against pressing him with further questions. She worked alongside Remus awhile longer in silence, until they ran out of seeds.

"Hm. I thought I had a few dozen more than that," Remus mused, getting up to brush dirt from his knees. He walked back toward the pail and rummaged through it for more pumpkin seeds, but found none.

Ginny scooped her little pile of ruined seeds from the ground, and stood up as well. "You have these, but they're not going to grow," she said matter-of-factly, turning them over into Remus's palm.

Remus stared at them a moment, and then gave Ginny a peculiar look.

"How do you know they're not going to grow?" he asked.

Ginny opened her mouth to answer, and realized at once that there was nothing to say. "I don't know," she said honestly. "I just...." She looked at the seeds in his hand. "Can't you tell they're dead?" It had seemed obvious to her.

Remus hesitated, then closed his hand around the seeds and smiled at her. "Well then we can't plant them, can we?" he asked mildly. "We'll have to go down to the village and purchase a few more. Care to join me?"

Ginny frowned again, feeling odd, as if something important had been revealed and she just didn't know what it was. "Sure," she said. "Let's go."

She followed Remus inside, waited for him to collect his money, and then walked with him out of Lupin Lodge and into the road—where she froze.

"Sod off, Malfoy."

"Go to hell, Weasley."

She could feel Remus tense beside her, and it didn't ease her sudden fear to know that her usually calm teacher was as perturbed as she was by the sight before them. There at the edge of the road was her brother, standing between Hermione and Harry. They were wearing their old school robes—they must have finished their exam and Apparated home for the first time. And either during that exam or directly after it, something very wrong must have happened, because Ron was rigid from his forehead to his feet. His stance was duel-ready. And the tip of his wand touched Draco Malfoy's heart.

Something sharp and white hot touched Ginny's own heart, watching them. The two boys breathed in unison, each ready to kill the other—Draco's wand was at his side but everyone knew how it was between them. If Draco could have had his wand up first, he would have. It was an equal hatred. But she had not ever seen her brother so close to committing a serious crime, and it was frightening. This—*this*—was Hermione's greatest fear, and Ginny knew it. And it was a legitimate fear, because sometimes Ron's temper was stronger than he was. It ran in their family.

Harry stood at attention on his left, ready to back Ron at a second's notice. Hermione stood on his right, pleading softly, without breath. "No, please—please stop—take your wand down—this isn't worth it—"

Ginny had not yet seen Hermione look this desperate—not even in the last moments before Voldemort's defeat. She had not seen Ron trembling as if on the verge of an actual killing. And she had not laid eyes on Draco since the last day of the war.

He was living across the street, of course, but he must have been doing his best to avoid all of

them because she hadn't seen him at all. She realized now that she was glad of his cowardice and she hoped she wouldn't run across him again anytime soon—it was very, very hard to look at him. In fact, she felt such a strong wave of sympathy toward him that she very nearly felt like a traitor, and this was mixed with an even stronger wave of nausea. The sight of Draco brought the events of the last battle against Voldemort crashing into her memory.

It was difficult to erase her last image of Draco Malfoy, as it was difficult to erase everything terrible about the war. But that last day had been especially nightmarish. And it had all been so fast—so fast. She remembered watching Harry raise his wand to attempt *Expecto Sacrificum* against a looming Voldemort. And she remembered seeing, as if in a dream, the sideways approach of Lucius Malfoy, his wand raised, a fury twisting his features.

Hermione's words had come bluntly into her mind. *"We all have to be willing to die. All of us. For Harry. And if there's a moment—even just one—that any of us consciously backs down from that duty... all of us are tied together in this, once we accept. If one of us fails the promise, then all of us can die."*

Ginny probably would have done it anyway—no—she knew she would have. Hermione's words had only driven her to it more swiftly. It wasn't a decision; it was an instinct. She had stepped entirely in front of Harry to block Lucius' curse with her own body. And she had known that she was going to die—it hadn't been a question. She had heard Lucius scream, *"Avada -"* and she had shut her eyes and known.

But her father had lunged bodily in front of her before the Killing Curse was complete. Ginny's mind echoed her own terrified screams back to her, mingled with her father's cry of *"Fractus!"*

The Killing Curse blew powerfully from the back end of Lucius Malfoy's fractured wand, striking him soundly in his chest. He was struck instantaneously dead, by his own hand, not two meters from his son.

This was the image that Ginny couldn't shake. The velocity of the memory was staggering—so much pain in mere seconds. Draco had fallen into the dirt, his knees against his father's side, his face slack with disbelief, his hands extended uselessly over his father's lifeless body. He had mouthed soundlessly. Unintelligibly. The grief in the air had been palpable, to Ginny. The unbearable grief. And the sickening cry that had torn out of Draco seconds later seemed to linger in the air, even now.

No one had gone to him, Ginny remembered. There hadn't been time, and he'd been with the enemy. Everyone who was still standing had gathered around Harry as he had ended the war, and Ginny couldn't even remember what had happened after the magnificent flash of light and sound that had driven Voldemort from the world. She didn't know how Draco had gotten off the Hogwarts grounds and home—or whether his father's body had gone with him. But now here he was in the road, on the wrong end of her brother's wand, and Ginny felt herself suddenly and fiercely protective of his life. At the same time, she felt entirely confused, and a little bit disgusted with herself. Why on earth should she feel so overwhelmingly worried about *Malfoy*? She ought to have been worried about her brother and only her brother, at a moment like this.

"Ron."

Harry, Ron and Hermione spun like one entity toward the sound of Remus's even voice. Ron's wand fell to his side and he flushed. Hermione's features flooded with relief. Harry's jaw clenched.

Ron moved first. He threw Draco a final look of contempt and stalked through the yard past Ginny and Remus, muttering something profane about where certain people would Apparate, if they were smart. Hermione was on his heels, alarm and anger evident on her face as she disappeared into the cottage.

Harry was the last, and Ginny realized with some surprise that he wasn't looking at Remus, or at Draco. Instead, he was looking at her with open concern on his face. Slowly she registered the fact that at some point during her recollection of the war, she had grabbed Remus tightly by the arm with both her hands. Her legs felt quite unsteady.

"Are you all right, Ginny?" Remus asked, his voice low.

Ginny nodded, feeling strangely dizzy and wondering if she was very pale. Harry was walking away from Draco as though he didn't exist and coming toward her, but for some odd reason she could only watch Draco. He still hadn't raised his wand—not even when Harry had turned his back—and there was something so strangely lonely about his face that Ginny's heart went out to it instinctively. She gripped Remus's arm tighter, not sure what to make of her unwelcome feelings.

"What's wrong?" Harry had come quite close. "You look sick."

Ginny didn't answer. She *felt* sick. She was watching Draco turn around and go silently back across the street, up the great lawn of the Lewis Manor. She watched him until he'd disappeared inside, then shook her head, trying to clear it. What was *wrong* with her today? She looked at

Harry, whose green eyes were fixed worriedly on her face.

"I'm okay," she heard herself say. Slowly, she made herself let go of Remus's arm. "What happened at the exam?"

Harry didn't look convinced. "We all passed," he said shortly. "Are you sure you don't need to come in and lie down?"

Ginny felt herself blush. Harry had been so much friendlier to her in the past several days that it was really astounding. "I'm really fine, Harry," she assured him quietly.

"I'm glad to hear that you all passed your tests," Remus said carefully, after a moment. "But I'd like to know what just happened here, with Draco." He paused. "Or should I be asking Ron?"

Harry sighed, and met Remus's gaze. He looked terribly tired, all of a sudden. "He and Ron must have taken their tests at the same time. I don't really know. I Apparated back into the D.A.L. and they were already..." he trailed off, looking as if he didn't want to rat Ron out, even if it was just to explain the situation to Remus.

Ginny nodded, and spared him having to finish. "Malfoy said something nasty, and Ron went at him," she said, as sure of her answer as if she'd been there to see the scene herself.

Harry nodded in confirmation.

Ginny turned to Remus. "Ron thinks it's Malfoy's fault that the Death Eaters went after Hermione's parents," she explained.

Harry looked at Ginny seriously. "Yeah. And Malfoy thinks it's your dad's fault that his father is dead."

Ginny's eyebrows shot up. "Did he *say* that?"

"Pretty loudly."

Ginny looked to Remus, who was standing and absorbing the information, looking even wearier than Harry. "Well, that's all to be expected, I suppose, though it's too bad that any of you have to deal with it just now. Perhaps I should try to have a talk with Ron—"

Harry held up a hand. "I wouldn't right now," he advised, looking toward the door of Lupin Lodge as if he had no desire at all to go inside. "They'll be fighting in there."

"Well don't go in, then," Ginny said quickly. "Leave them to it and come with us. We're going to get a few things in the village, for the garden."

"They'll kill each other," Harry protested, still watching the door dubiously.

"Good, let them," Ginny urged. "Spares us the trouble."

Remus laughed. "Funny," he said absently, grinning into space. "But Lily used to say those words exactly, whenever Sirius and I—" but here he stopped, and looked at Harry as if to gain permission to continue.

"Go on," Harry said swiftly.

Ginny looked at him. Harry seemed to have forgotten Ron and Hermione—and even the confrontation with Draco. He pushed his glasses up on his nose, his focus now totally on whatever Remus had been about to say.

Remus nodded. "Well... why don't you come with us, then, Harry. I'll tell you how your father used to try to smooth out minor disagreements between Sirius and myself."

They started walking down the road, towards where Malfoy had been standing moments earlier, and Remus continued, "Let's just say that Sirius was not always the well-balanced, even-tempered adult that you've grown used to." Harry raised an eyebrow, Remus shot Ginny an amused glance, and she smiled back at him. She knew that this was his way of answering her earlier question. He hadn't forgotten.

"James and Sirius were, of course, as close as brothers, and often thought with one brain, although your father was a bit more cautious than Sirius—not by much, but a enough to prevent them from causing serious damage most of the time." Remus stopped and laughed, slightly. "That's serious with an e."

Ginny and Harry grinned at each other, and Remus continued. "In school, I usually joined in, of course, generally after I'd given them several disapproving glances and warnings. And even when I didn't participate in their latest prank, it was always amusing to watch."

"Sounds familiar," said Harry, shrugging his robe off of one shoulder as they walked, revealing a T-shirt underneath. The sun was quite warm, although Ginny wasn't sure if the warmth on the back of her neck was from the sun or from something else.

"Yes," answered Remus. "Well, all that was fine until your parents got married, Harry. Sirius and I were left sharing a flat alone, and James was no longer constantly around to maintain an even atmosphere. We had some rows—both of us kept expecting to have James walk in any minute and break it up, but he didn't, and I think both of us were rather shocked in the beginning."

Harry craned his neck to peer backward down the road towards Lupin Lodge. "You don't think I should go back and see...."

"No," Ginny said firmly, grabbing the robes slung over his arm and pulling him along. Harry resisted for a moment; Ginny turned back and pulled harder. After a moment, he laughed.

"All right. This is more interesting anyway," he conceded, and gave Remus his attention once more.

Ginny wanted to smile—Harry had given in to her, after all. But the Lewis Manor had caught her eye the moment she'd turned back, and now her mind had returned to its previous, unsettled state. Her memories of the war were so clear—*too* clear. And why had Remus looked at her so strangely when she'd given him back those seeds? It was all so odd.

However hard she tried to concentrate on Harry and the things he was learning about his parents, Ginny found herself walking alongside Remus with a mind far more confused than attentive. Maybe she just wasn't feeling well. Too many hours out in the sun today. Ginny shook her head, glanced from Remus to Harry, and worked to forget her uneasiness as the three of them continued into the village together.

* * * * *

Hermione was not surprised when Ron headed directly through the house and toward the back garden. She knew that he found it difficult to contain himself indoors when he was angry; he banged his way through the front room, cursed loudly all the way down the corridor and slammed open the back door without much regard for the hinges. Hermione followed more quietly, doing her best to sort out her thoughts, which were spinning even more quickly than usual. Watching Ron a moment ago, she'd seen something terribly frightening happen in his face. He'd looked as if he wanted to kill Malfoy. Really kill him.

"Ron, stop, I can't keep up," she panted, pushing through the hedge at the end of the planted garden and running to catch up with Ron, who had nearly reached the forest. He stopped at her request, however, and turned to wait for her, a dark look on his face. Hermione caught up, and worked to catch her breath, unsure of what she wanted to say to him about what had happened at the D.A.L.

"He needs to go the hell home," Ron said abruptly, his eyes fierce. "And I don't need a lecture from you right now."

Hermione felt irritation rise up instantly in her blood. She hadn't intended to fight, but Ron always knew exactly what to say to get her started. "I just came out here to *talk* to you, Ron."

"Right. I know that look."

"*What* look?"

"That one." Ron pointed to her face. "The one you get when you're about to tell me off."

Hermione opened her mouth to do just that, but Ron shook his head and cut her off.

"I didn't do anything to him, did I? And I don't want to talk about him now. I just want him to leave."

"But if he stays, you're going to threaten him in the middle of the street every time he does something you don't like?" Hermione snapped. "He hasn't provoked us; he hasn't tried to interfere at all in our summer until today, and then only because we were forced into using the same exam center. He probably doesn't want to be here any more than you want him here!"

Ron eyed her silently for a moment. "Nice of you to stand up for Malfoy," he said finally, then pivoted and began to stride away, nearly twice as fast as he had been going previously.

"That is RIDICULOUS!" Hermione yelled, lunging after him and grabbing him by the wrist. "That doesn't even make sense and you know it! Stay here and *talk* to me!"

Ron turned sharply and yanked his hand out of her grip. "You want me to let Malfoy make ugly comments about you, is that it?" he said heatedly. "You think he should be allowed to keep that Death Eater attitude after everything we fought for? No!"

"There's nothing you can do about his attitude!"

Ron put a hand to his wand. "Oh yes there is."

Hermione shuddered involuntarily. "You don't mean that. Stop it. Stop acting like you want to hurt him."

"I do want to hurt him."

"No," Hermione said quickly, choosing to ignore the fact that Ron was clearly telling the truth. "No you don't. It's a word, Ron. Mudblood is just a word. It's not worth fighting over."

"Then what was that war *about*, Hermione?" Ron hollered, slamming his fist into his palm. "I'm not letting him get away with it."

"So you're going to curse him, next time he calls me a name? Is that what you're telling me?"

"I'm saying he'd deserve it if I did!"

"You'd be put in prison if you did."

Ron didn't reply. He looked very much as if he would have liked to hit something. Instead, he bent down suddenly, picked up a rock, and hurled it into the forest with incredible force. Hermione watched him, wondering what to make of it. She often didn't know what to make of Ron's temper; it wasn't entirely under his control and though she hated to admit it, it sometimes frightened her a little.

After a long, silent moment, Ron dropped down to sit in the grass, and ran a hand through his hair. "I told you I didn't want to talk about this," he said.

Hermione knelt down beside him and sat on her heels. "But *I* want to."

Ron looked at her. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

"You're scaring me," she continued, choosing to ignore his sarcasm, "I don't want Malfoy here, either. But there's nothing we can do about it and when you had your wand on him in the street like that, I thought for a second..." Hermione trailed off and clasped her hands in her lap. "I mean, I know you wouldn't really *kill* anybody--"

"I would."

Ron said it so firmly and so unhesitatingly that Hermione flinched.

"Please don't ever say that," she whispered, feeling her heart beat faster. She loved Ron, there was no way not to love him, but it made her sick to think that he could want to hurt someone that badly.

"But it's the truth," he answered. "I would. I'd kill anything that tried to hurt you."

The sick feeling in Hermione's stomach disappeared and was replaced with the familiar rush of heat that only Ron could bring on. He had always been so passionate about defending her; she'd lost track of the number of times that she and Harry had had to hold Ron back by his robes because Malfoy had said something particularly nasty to her. And every time he'd gone to battle for her, she had only learned to love him more. His protective instinct toward her had always made her feel safe and special—even before she had understood the reasons for her feelings.

Without a word, she reached for one of Ron's big hands, which was resting on his knee, and slipped her hand into it. His fingers tightened immediately around hers.

"I don't mean to scare you," he mumbled, after a moment.

She nodded.

"Ginny told me you cried, the day you saw Malfoy," Ron continued. "She told me you were worried I'd hurt him and get carted off to Azkaban."

"Culparrat," Hermione corrected unthinkingly. "Not Azkaban anymore—and Ginny wasn't supposed to tell you any of that!"

Ron shrugged. "Yeah, that's what she said. I'm glad she did, though. Did you really say..." Ron stopped, and the ear that Hermione could see turned a definite shade of pink.

"Did I really say what?" she prodded.

"That, er... that you could stand anything but me getting taken away?" Ron blushed entirely now, and Hermione smiled. She reached up and gently kissed his very red ear.

"Yes. And I meant it."

Ron squeezed her hand, then let it go and put his arm around her. "Well it's not like I *want* to get put away," he said, and laughed. "I'll ignore Malfoy if I have to. I don't want us separated, either."

He leaned his head against hers, and Hermione thought guiltily of her intention to leave England to seek out the Thinker. She pushed the thought away. That was entirely different than being arrested for an Unforgivable Curse. "Just promise me that you won't fight with Malfoy again," she asked.

Ron groaned. "Hermione, I just said--"

"Just please. Promise me."

Hermione felt Ron's ribs rise and fall as he gave an inaudible sigh beside her. "Fine," he agreed quietly. "I'll promise. Even though he makes me want to--"

"I know."

Ron turned and looked at her, and she felt a thrill run through her at the intensity of his expression. She shut her eyes, knowing that he would kiss her, and a moment later she felt his mouth cover hers.

"So we can Apparate," he murmured, several minutes later.

"I know. I was so nervous, I thought I'd fail."

Ron laughed. "No comment."

"Oh, shut up." She kissed him. "I was thinking I ought to visit my parents, now that we have our licenses. Can we go on Monday?"

"Fine with me. I'll tell Goldie I need Monday off—can I tell him why, if he asks?"

"Yes, all right. And, Ron? Have you ever heard of Thinkers?" The abruptness of her own question startled Hermione. She hadn't realized she wanted to ask him the question until the words were out, and once they were out, she wished she could put them back in.

Ron looked at her curiously, clearly intrigued by this sudden change of conversation. "Sure. Harnessing magic and all that. There's this one down in Greece, or something. Someplace Unplottable. She works with the Ministry every once in awhile—develops spells, I think. My dad knows. Why?"

"Oh, no reason."

It was a lie, and Hermione wished that she could take that back, as well—especially since Ron didn't look as though he believed her at all.

"Okay..." he began, clearly unconvinced.

Hermione shook her head to stop him, and decided to tell part of the truth. "I've just been thinking lately about my parents, and how a Thinker might be able to develop the magic to restore their minds."

Ron looked surprised. "I never thought of that," he said. "You should write to her."

"I have." Hermione looked down and started picking at the grass, still unsure of how much she wanted to reveal.

"Really?" Ron sat up straighter. "Did you tell her about your parents?"

"No."

"No?" Ron paused, as if waiting for an answer. When Hermione gave none, he nudged her with his shoulder. "Well why not?"

"Because it wasn't that kind of letter." She looked up at Ron quickly, and saw that he was frowning.

"Are you being mysterious on purpose, or something? What kind of letter was it?" he demanded, looking at her intently.

Hermione sighed. She'd gotten herself this far into it. "It was a letter seeking employment," she said quietly. "I asked her if she wanted an apprentice."

Ron seemed to freeze, for a split second. "An—"

"Apprentice."

"Oh." Ron shifted. "In Greece."

"Off Cyprus, I think. I mean, I can't be sure because it's Unplottable, but if you look at it logically, then from the reading I've done it seems to be—"

"So you're going there." His voice was abrupt. Short. He dropped his arm from her shoulders and sat back to look at her.

"I didn't say that."

"But you got the job."

"I didn't say that either."

"You got every other job you applied for, Hermione, and you're going to tell me you didn't get this one?"

"Yes."

Ron blinked. Obviously he hadn't been expecting that answer. "Yes?" he asked, tentatively. "Yes, you didn't get it?" He couldn't quite hide the hope in his voice, and Hermione fought down a sudden surge of anger. She'd known that Ron wouldn't be keen on the idea of her leaving England, but she had also expected his support.

"Yes. I didn't get it."

Ron nodded. "That's too bad," he offered, a little too cheerfully.

Hermione snorted, not quite under her breath. "And we have a winner for most encouraging boyfriend of the century."

"Now come on," Ron began, working his face into a position of supportive interest, which irritated Hermione even further. "If it was what you really wanted, then I'm sorry you didn't—"

Hermione waved her hands to stop him. "Don't even try it. You're better off not saying anything else, honestly."

Ron sighed. "So now I'm in trouble."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Please." She stood up and brushed the dirt from her robes, unwilling

to talk to Ron any further about her real plans for the end of the summer. Since speaking to Ginny, she'd decided that if no letter of acceptance came from the Thinker, she would attempt to find the woman anyway. And if Ron didn't want to be helpful about it, then she just wouldn't tell him anything else right now. "Let's just go in." She began to walk quickly toward the back of the house.

Ron scrambled to his feet and caught up with her. "It's Harry's birthday next Friday," he said, obviously hoping for a change of subject.

Hermione nodded, and kept walking.

"We ought to do something for him, since we get to be with him this year," Ron continued earnestly, as if a show of friendship toward Harry would earn him forgiveness. "Don't you think?"

"Sure, why not." Hermione thought that her tone was noticeably nonplussed, but Ron only grinned, apparently forgetting all about Thinkers for the time being as they approached the back door. He continued to talk about Harry.

"We ought to surprise him. Really get him good. I'll bet Fred and George would come up from Hogsmeade, and we could get Sirius to stay home for once—I'll tell Dad to make him take the day off."

"Great idea," Hermione said briefly. It was amazing, the way Ron could completely ignore the fact that she was angry, and continue a conversation all by himself.

"We can plan the entire thing behind his back," Ron finished happily, looking very pleased with himself.

"You mean we can plan it in front of his face," Hermione corrected tersely, walking up the back steps. "Don't you think he might guess?"

Ron guffawed. "Who, Harry? When he's got Cannons tryouts starting on Monday? We could talk about it all night at dinner and he wouldn't even hear us. He's oblivious half the time, and it's even worse when Quidditch is involved, trust me. Dean, Seamus, Neville and I used to joke about transfiguring his Firebolt into a girl and slipping it into bed with him one night. We thought he might push it away if he didn't recognize it as his broomstick. He did sleep with it in the bed once before a match you know."

Hermione's hand went to her mouth and she instinctively tried to stifle her giggle. She realized again why it was so difficult to stay angry with Ron for more than five seconds at a time. "Ron!" She tried to sound shocked and angry, but she knew that her eyes were betraying her. "You never actually *did* that, did you?"

He shook his head, but raised one eyebrow suggestively.

"You won't do that now! Don't go getting any ideas in your head!"

Ron looked back at her for a long moment. "Yeah," he answered. "I know." He smiled.

They stood still until the moment had passed. Hermione's annoyance passed along with it, although she knew that she and Ron still had a lot to work out. She'd told him a bit of what she was thinking, and she'd seen his response. For now, she'd keep the Thinker to herself. She had until the end of the summer to make him understand.

She headed into Lupin Lodge with Ron at her side, laughing openly when he suggested that they give Harry a framed copy of his first Daily Prophet interview as a birthday present.

— CHAPTER NINE —

The Kinolia

On the first day of the Chudley Cannons' Quidditch trials, Harry woke earlier than everyone else, a familiar fluttering sensation in his stomach. He smiled slightly at the idea that Oliver Wood still inspired a sort of panic in him, after all he'd been through. But this panic didn't bring terror with it—this was a welcome sort of anxiety. Harry had missed his Quidditch nerves.

He jumped out of bed and dressed with more energy than he'd had in quite some time. Taking care not to wake Ron, he sped downstairs. Lupin Lodge was quiet and the sky outside was barely getting light; there was a smell of grass and dew seeping through the kitchen windows. The familiar scent and the sense of too-earliness reminded Harry of many Hogwarts mornings when he had been out of bed well before his classmates and down on the pitch with the Gryffindor team in half-darkness. Oliver had never minded dragging them from sleep at maddening hours. Harry remembered Fred and George's complaints, Angelina's heavy-lidded eyes, his own sense of a drowsiness so strong that he knew he'd fall off his broom. And then he would be up in the air, the wind in his face, wide awake in seconds—flying. He felt a brief pang as he made himself breakfast and sat down. Those had been wonderful times.

Hastily, he shoveled spoonful after spoonful of cereal into his mouth. His eyes were fixed intently on his Firebolt, which he had just leaned against the wall, and as he chewed, Harry went over his concerns in his mind. Was he too young to try out for a real team? No—of course not. Viktor Krum had done it. Was he good enough to fly next to professionals? Yes—of course he was—he'd played with Oliver, hadn't he, and Oliver was a professional. But still... Harry's stomach churned, much as it had before many important matches at school. Would he make an idiot out of himself? He hadn't practiced enough for this—he wasn't ready—hadn't played a real match in months.

But, nerves or not, he was going. He Banished his bowl and spoon into the kitchen sink and set water running. A minute later, he had grasped his Firebolt by the handle and was ready to go. Quickly, his heart thumping now, Harry strode to the front room to check the local map—being new at Apparition made him want to take care that he was exact.

He had just put his finger on the town in which the Cannons' practice pitch was located and screwed up his courage to Disapparate when he stopped. There were footsteps on the stairs. Looking up, he saw that Ginny was standing halfway down them, her hair rumpled and her dressing gown pulled shut with one hand. She looked half-asleep, but, upon spotting Harry, lifted her other hand to give him a small wave.

"Good luck today," she said, sleepiness making her voice crack a bit. She blinked even though the light was still dim, and stood in the middle of the stairs as if not quite sure what to do with herself.

Harry wondered if Ginny had woken up on purpose, just to wish him well. The idea made his cheeks warm, though he worked not to show it.

"Thanks," he replied casually, though he was gripping the Firebolt and searching his brain for something bright to say. "Let's just hope I can keep up with the professionals," was all that came to mind.

Ginny yawned a little, covering her mouth and finishing on a sigh. "Oh, go on, don't be modest, you know you'll be Seeker," she mumbled, throwing him a sleepy smile. "Just cross your fingers and hope for the best." Then she grinned at her own joke, giggled, and turned up the stairs. Harry watched her until all he could see was the hem of her nightdress and the heels of her bare feet. And then, feeling bolstered by her confidence in him, he straightened his shoulders, cleared his mind of everything but where he was going, and Disapparated.

This sensation was unlike all other modes of instantaneous wizarding travel, and Harry liked it by far the best. There was neither the spinning nausea that one felt using Floo powder, nor the

jerk behind the navel and tendency to stumble on impact that a Portkey always seemed to cause. Apparition was actually enjoyable by comparison—just a simple, momentary blankness—then a new place. It was such a fast process that Harry had hardly blinked in the dead space between locations, before there was light and noise and the sound of a far off whistle carrying along the summer breeze.

Harry immediately felt his shoes grow damp and looked down to find that he was standing in wet, muddied grass. When his eyes traveled upward, he saw that he was at the edge of a wide field dotted with men and women, most of them as young as himself, though some were clearly Quidditch players gone to seed. Harry didn't recognize any of the players; there were no famous names here. *Only hopefuls and has-beens*, he thought, without meaning to think it. *Well, that's the Cannons...* But he shook the thought out of his head, imagining Ron's reaction to such a statement. And then he grinned to himself, because the imagined reaction was actually pretty funny.

Harry had expected to be early, but these players seemed to have been warming up for quite some time. He watched them flying this way and that, dodging and diving—Harry thought he spotted a Wronski Feint somewhere across the way and couldn't help a flash of satisfaction. He fainted better than that.

A shrill whistle distracted Harry from his view and he turned to see a young man of good height and strong build striding purposefully down the pitch with an almost fanatical gleam in his eye. Harry found himself grinning as though he were eleven years old all over again.

"Men!" cried Oliver Wood, raising a hand in the air to gesture the players toward him.

"And women!" cried a girl from down the field, rather indignantly. Harry snorted. Something about that was awfully familiar.

Oliver did not even have the decency to look chastised. "And women!" he added, impatiently. "Over here—NOW!"

This was something Harry understood. This was home. He hustled, Firebolt in hand, into the gathering group of players, wondering all the time whether Oliver would catch sight of him, or whether he was too focused on Quidditch at the moment to see the faces of his players. Harry would not have been surprised if the latter were the case.

And indeed it was—without noting Harry in the slightest, Oliver sorted the players quickly into positions and Harry found himself in a group with six other Seekers. Out of the corner of his eye, he sized up his competition, feeling all the time more confident. One woman looked slight and nimble enough to be a possible rival, and one of the men held a Nimbus Two Thousand in his hand—*Good taste, anyway*, Harry granted inwardly. But as for the rest of them... Harry squared his shoulders. He was going to be fine.

"Listen up!" came Oliver's battle cry from the center of the pitch. He began to pace back and forth before the players, who now stood lined up by position. "Some of you might have come out today thinking this would be an easy job—thinking as the Cannons haven't won a League in a hundred and six years, you'd be able to make this team even if you couldn't make any other."

Two of the men behind Harry shifted uncomfortably. Oliver peered in their direction.

"Thought that, did you?" he demanded. "Well, you've all got another think coming. You're not going to get soft treatment here and you can forget about getting on this team if you're anything less than brilliant. There's a reason that the Cannons have been down so long. Bad attitudes. Lack of dedication. Pathetic captaining. Unskilled players. Poor equipment." Oliver stopped, and looked into the sky for a moment, his arms crossed. "All right, there are a *lot* of reasons why the Cannons have been down so long."

Harry bit back a snort.

"But that's all about to change," Oliver continued, beginning to pace once more. "It's going to change starting today. I didn't leave the Puddlemere United to captain a losing team. I didn't come to the Cannons to cross my fingers and hope for the best."

There were a few snickers from the assembled players. Oliver stopped walking and glared hard at all of them.

"Think that's funny?" he intoned darkly.

The laughter came to an immediate halt and Harry shook his head slightly in amazement. Oliver had a way about him; that was for sure. Harry was beginning to feel that this wasn't going to be as simple as he'd imagined, and felt himself standing straighter, under his captain's scrutinizing gaze.

Oliver gave a snort of disgust. "Let's all cross our fingers and hope for the best? Sorriest motto I've ever heard. I don't know who approved that miserable change but that's the kind of defeatist attitude I *won't* put up with. So while you're up there today, Beating, and Chasing, and Keeping, and Seeking, you just keep this in the front of your minds—*We. Shall. Conquer.* That's our motto, and if you can't hack it, then you'll want to get out now."

There was dead silence on the pitch.

"Everyone staying then?" Oliver looked across them once more and then nodded, satisfied. "Mount your brooms. Let's see who gets to stay for good."

Harry was on his broom before anyone else could blink an eye, and when Oliver called out, "Seekers up-DID YOU HEAR ME? MOVE!" he was the first one into the air. Below him he could hear Oliver's manic shouts. "I want to see diving! I want to see feinting! I want to see you willing to break your necks for that Snitch!"

And he's not joking, Harry thought with a grimace as Oliver began to put them through their paces. Oliver would happily die for a Quidditch victory and it became clear-as he pulled the Seekers out of one feint only half an inch from collision with the grass-that he expected the same reckless abandon from the rest of them. The other players seemed to find such a demand daunting, and there was more than one mutter of "Is he insane?" in the air around Harry. But, having had a lot of experience in the neck-risking department, Harry couldn't be bothered to worry much about a little hard diving. Especially as the Golden Snitch was one thing that he really didn't mind risking life and limb for. He dove at full speed for an hour, thinking of nothing, remembering nothing, having no focus but the tiny ball of gold, which flickered its silver wings against the pitch.

And at the end of an hour, a whistle signaled the Seekers' break, and Harry watched the group of Chasers shoot into the air to await their instructions. He landed, breathing hard, and made his way toward Oliver, who was motioning for the Seekers to come his way. On all sides of him, Harry could feel the other Seekers sagging-they were winded from the exertion. He was exhilarated. The only one apart from him who seemed to be in shape enough for this was the slight woman whom he had noticed earlier. But even she was regarding Oliver with something very like terror in her eyes, and Harry guessed that she probably wasn't willing to lose her life over a Quidditch match. He hid a grin.

"I hope you men realize that this was just a warm up-" Oliver barked, as they drew nearer "-and that you plan to show up with a little more fire under your bums tomorrow. You-" he pointed sharply to one of the men behind Harry. "Good arms on you, but you're in the wrong position here."

"But I've always played Seek-"

"Things change. Get over there with the Beaters, I want to see what you can do that end." The man hurried off. "You-" Oliver continued, pointing at the man on Harry's other side. "Worried about falling?"

"I-no."

"Then what are you on about, pulling out of dives two feet before everyone else? Do that again and you're out of here. You there-" he nodded to the woman among them.

"Not bad. Not bad at all. Keep that up, you hear me?"

Harry saw the woman duck her head, beaming. But instead of feeling glad for her, he felt a slight queasiness in his gut. He'd always considered himself to be a pretty damned good Seeker, but Oliver hadn't even noticed him yet. *I must have lost my touch, or something...* Harry found himself gripping the handle of the Firebolt with more than his usual intensity, and for the first time he realized just how much it meant to him to make the team. Cannons or not-he wanted this.

"And you." Oliver was looking straight at him. Harry snapped out of his reverie and jumped.

"Yeah?"

"Back for more, are you?" Oliver's eyes narrowed.

Harry felt a wave of relief. He had been recognized. This was going to be great. Perhaps especially because behind Oliver's steely Quidditch glare, Harry suddenly detected the fifth year boy he had met in Professor McGonagall's office. His chest filled with a strange, homecoming kind of warmth as he looked at his old captain and teammate for a moment in silence. Smiles tugged hard at the corners of both their mouths, though both struggled to maintain professional distance. But it didn't last-on irresistible impulse, Harry stuck out his hand.

"Oliver."

"Harry."

Oliver grasped his hand, pumped it up and down once, and nodded. "You can do better than that feint you just gave me, Potter."

Harry felt the other Seekers staring at him at the mention of his name, but he nodded back at Oliver. "I know it."

"Then do it. Tomorrow morning, six-thirty sharp, on this pitch. Got that, all of you?"

"Six-thir-" Harry began to protest, as if this was Hogwarts and he were being dragged from his Gryffindor four-poster yet again.

But Oliver cut him off at once with a growl. "Hold back on me again tomorrow and it'll be five-thirty. Seekers dismissed."

With that, Oliver strode off toward the Chasers, blowing his whistle and waving his arms in the air—and only when he was safely out of earshot did Harry allow himself to groan. “Six-thirty,” he muttered, shaking his head. “That lunatic. That total—”

“Harry Potter—did I hear that properly?”

It was the female Seeker, and her voice was curious. Harry turned to look at her, feeling his defenses go up at once.

“Yes.”

“Oh. That is—well I...” She seemed at a loss, and Harry didn’t feel much like helping her. He hated being recognized, when it was like this. Self-consciously he flattened his hair over his scar.

But the woman didn’t seem to notice. She just shrugged. “Well, you probably get this all the time—hope you don’t mind—but I just wanted to say thanks.”

Harry started. “Th- thanks?” he repeated, not sure what she meant.

The woman frowned slightly. “For what you’ve done, of course. Against the Dark Lord. I don’t mean to bother you about it—just to say thanks.” She smiled. “Nice flying, too,” she added, and then walked away, leaving Harry with his mouth half-open in shock. No one had ever randomly thanked him for his fight against Voldemort, and he didn’t quite know what to make of it. It.... well, it didn’t bother him, he realized. It was really sort of... nice? He shrugged. At least it wasn’t the same as having someone gape openly at his scar.

Across the field, up in the air, the Chasers were doing impossible loops around the goalposts, tossing the Quaffle back and forth in accordance with Oliver’s commands. Harry sighed a little. He wished the Seekers’ bit of it had gone on a little longer—he’d missed being up on a broomstick for a real purpose. Six-thirty in the morning was actually too far away, he reflected wryly, pulling his wand from his T-shirt and Disapparating.

The Quidditch pitch disappeared, the world went blank, and then he was stumbling—stumbling over something very solid, which was squealing indignantly.

“Ow, Harry, are you mad?!”

Harry had Apparated without any trouble into the front room of Lupin Lodge, but he hadn’t taken the other occupants of the house into account. He’d Apparated directly into Ginny, and she’d gone crashing to the ground. She lay sprawled in front of the big fireplace, rubbing her elbow where it appeared she’d slammed it. She looked a bit vexed, but after a moment she began to laugh uncontrollably.

“I could get you fined for that, you know!” she managed, between gasps. “That’s Reckless Apparition, that’s what it is—I’m calling the D.A.L.!”

Harry knew he was crimson. “I’m so sorry...” he attempted, reaching out a hand to help her up. It was too late; she’d already pushed herself to her feet, still laughing, and to Harry’s surprise he heard another, lower laugh coming from the direction of the fireplace. He spun toward the voice, praying that no one else had seen his fumbled attempt at Apparition, and his face burned even hotter when he recognized the plump face that was chuckling in the flames.

“Good to see you, Harry,” said Neville Longbottom happily. “I guess you’ve got your Apparition License.”

Harry glanced at Ginny, who had smothered her giggles but was still eyeing him mirthfully, and he shrugged. “Yeah,” he agreed. “I probably won’t get to keep it for long, though. Hey, Neville.” He made himself grin back at his fellow Gryffindor, whom he hadn’t seen since their last day at Hogwarts. “What’ve you been doing lately?” he asked quickly, hoping to distract everyone from the ridiculous entrance he’d just made.

“Well, I’ve just been talking to Ginny, here—” Neville smiled at Ginny, who smiled back “—and now I have to go to the greenhouses. I’m actually a little late.”

Harry looked from Neville to Ginny and back again. “The greenhouses?” he repeated. “Why?”

Neville opened his mouth to answer, but Ginny held up a hand. “I’ll explain, Neville,” she said kindly. “You go on and don’t be late—you know how Professor Sprout can be about that. Thanks for everything.”

“Sure.” Neville grinned again and looked at Harry. “Hope I’ll see you soon, Harry. Pop in anytime you want. Only, don’t knock me over, okay?”

Neville’s head was gone with a ‘pop’ before Harry could even reply, and Ginny was sent into a second hysterical fit of laughter. But when she’d calmed down enough, she seemed to remember something important, because she opened her eyes wide and held out her hands palms up, as if waiting for information.

“Well?” she asked excitedly.

“Well what?” Harry asked, feeling irritable.

"Well the *Cannons*," Ginny replied. "Tuh, honestly. How was it? Did you see Oliver? Was anybody any good? How did the Firebolt behave?"

"Oh. Right." Harry felt himself beginning to grin. "Yeah, I saw Oliver."

Ginny clapped her hands together. "What did he *say*? I'll bet he was surprised to see you there."

"He didn't even recognize me."

"No!" Ginny looked scandalized. "But he flew with you for three whole years!"

Harry laughed. "I know. But that's Oliver—he's so intense about Quidditch, he didn't even notice I was there until the end."

Ginny shook her head. "Weird. And the other Seekers? Anybody with any real training or talent?"

"A couple were all right," Harry answered, warming to the conversation. "There was one with a Nimbus Two Thousand—"

"Oh," Ginny interrupted, "Good broom. I remember when you had one of those. Poor old thing."

"Yeah." Harry laughed, surprised at how easy it was to talk to Ginny about Quidditch. "Yeah, I miss that thing. Anyway, I expected him to be all right, but he couldn't fly at all, really. Kept pulling out of dives two feet too early. There was a woman there, though—she was really good. I've never heard of her, but even Oliver said she was good, and he never gives anyone a break. She seems all right, too—once she figured out who I was, she—" Harry stopped. He'd been about to tell Ginny about what the woman had said to him after practice. He wondered how he could possibly have rambled on so far.

Ginny tilted her head expectantly. "What did she say?"

"Oh, she just..." Harry shook his head. "Nothing, you know." He searched his mind for some other subject while the look on Ginny's face became decidedly curious. "Hey," Harry said suddenly, remembering what had happened earlier. "What was Neville doing here?"

Ginny seemed to forget her curiosity at once—she avoided Harry's eyes and turned slightly pink. "Nothing," she said quickly. "We were just talking."

Harry felt his brows pull together. "What about?" he asked, not sure why he felt entitled to an answer.

"Oh, you know. Things." Ginny looked extremely uncomfortable, and began to tuck something deeper into the pocket of her jeans. For the first time, Harry realized that she had a quill sticking out of one pocket and a bit of parchment peeking over top of the other. It was the parchment that she was attempting to hide. "Did you know," she said, too brightly, "that Neville's taken a position at Hogwarts?"

"No," said Harry shortly, staring at the pocket where the parchment was hidden and wanting very much to know what was on it. More than that, he wanted to know why Ginny was blushing about Neville. It bothered him more than he wanted to think about.

"Well, he has. Professor Sprout's decided she's going to retire from teaching and raise medicinal herbs for apothecary wholesale, and Neville's going to take her place!"

"What, you mean, he's going to teach Herbology?" Harry couldn't help but pay attention to that—it was a shock to think of Neville teaching anything. Though, Harry reflected fairly, Neville had always been just as good as Hermione, when it came to Herbology.

"Yes, he's going to apprentice with Professor Sprout this year while Hogwarts is closed, and learn all he can—and if he's ready by the fall, he says that Professor McGonagall's going to let him have the position. Isn't that wonderful?" Ginny exclaimed, looking truly happy for Neville's sake.

"Yeah," Harry offered, feeling slightly ungenerous toward Neville at the moment. "Sounds great."

Ginny nodded, then pulled her quill from her pocket and began to tap it self-consciously against her leg, still looking mildly uncomfortable. "Well, anyway," she said vaguely. After a moment, she gestured to Harry's broom. "I'm glad you had such a good practice. Do you go back out tomorrow, then?"

Somewhat relieved that the conversation was steering back to Quidditch, Harry nodded and sighed heavily. "Back to the pitch at six-thirty," he muttered darkly, though deep down he didn't really mind. He'd have gone back at midnight, if that was what Oliver wanted.

"In the *morning*?" Ginny stuck out her tongue. "That's inhumane."

"I know," Harry answered with a laugh. "But then, Oliver's not exactly human."

* * * * *

The first week of practices seemed to pass in a blur of wind-chapped skin, aching muscles, and early-morning fatigue, but Harry loved it. Especially since, by the end of Friday afternoon's post-practice drills, Oliver had weeded down the number of potential team members by about half.

Harry's only remaining competition for the Seeker position was Maureen Knight, the slight woman who had earned Oliver's praise at the first day of tryouts, and that meant that one of them would definitely make the team and the other would be a reserve player. At the moment, Harry felt as though being a reserve player for the Chudley Cannons would be the most amazing job in the world. He Apparated back to Lupin Lodge after enduring a strict lecture from Oliver that he was "not to treat the weekend as some sort of pub-going holiday," staggered upstairs, and headed straight for the shower.

The water felt cool and refreshing and Harry stood under the spray until his skin was wrinkled. Then he stepped out, wrapped a towel around his waist, and shook out his hair, which almost looked respectable when it was wet. Realizing that he hadn't bothered to bring any clean clothes with him into the bathroom, he stood at the door for a moment, contemplating. Should he Summon a pair of trousers from his room, or just risk dashing down the hall? Feeling revived and clean, he opted for the latter option, and, opening the door just a slit, peered out into the hallway. Seeing no one about, he stepped out and began padding his way down the hall to the room that he shared with Ron. His hand was on the doorknob when he heard a gasp. He froze, and then, turning his head to the side, saw Ginny standing at the top of the stairs, staring at him wide-eyed.

"Er-hi, there," he managed, clutching at his towel and making a mental note to keep a spare set of trousers in the bathroom from now on. He wondered if his face was red. She was wearing some sort of pale green shirt and her hair was down around her shoulders, rather than in her every-day ponytail. But Harry was in no position to dwell on how pretty she looked, and he immediately concentrated very hard on the door in front of him.

Ginny opened her mouth to speak, then shut it again and, grinning slightly, looked past him down the hallway. Then she said, "I was just sent up here to see if you were home. Ron and Sirius have been getting creative in the kitchen and were wondering when you'd want to come downstairs to eat."

"Oh," said Harry, grasping his towel more tightly. "I'll... I'll be right down, shall I?"

"Right," answered Ginny, not moving from her spot on the stairs. Harry hastily turned the doorknob and slipped into his room.

When he came downstairs a few minutes later, it was only to find no evidence of cooking and no sign of people. Curious, he called out, "Ron?!" No answer. "Hermione? Sirius? Anyone?" He thought he heard a muffled giggle coming from the direction of the open window. Slowly, he made his way toward the back door and stepped out into the garden.

"SURPRISE!"

Harry jumped back in alarm. Filibuster Fireworks started going off all over the place and as Harry looked around, he saw Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Fred, George, Angelina, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Sirius and Remus.

Harry blinked, not sure what to say. In all the excitement of the past week, he had completely forgotten that today was July 31st—and that meant that it was his eighteenth birthday. Every year since he was eleven, he had faithfully marked off a calendar that showed the days left until he could return to school. This year, there had been no need, and not having a calendar had made him lose track of the time. Feeling a bit dim for forgetting his own birthday, Harry muttered "Thanks" with a sheepish grin, and stepped off of the patio into the garden proper.

A long table had been conjured from somewhere and it was full to the brim with so much food that Harry knew that Mrs. Weasley must have been around all day cooking it. He would have recognized her distinctive Yorkshire puddings anywhere. There had been little need to decorate the garden itself, for it was in full bloom with beautiful flowers and herbs, many of which were only visible to a wizard's eye.

The meal was delicious. Harry found out that Mrs. Weasley had indeed Apparated to Lupin Lodge early, just after he had left for Quidditch practice, and spent most of the day preparing for the party. Having spent most of the day in drills, Harry found that he was ravenous, and contented himself with eating second and third portions while he listened to the conversation around him.

Ginny was sitting across the table from him and listening attentively to her brother George, who was telling her all of the latest gossip from Hogsmeade, where he lived with Fred above their joke shop, Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes.

"Now that the war's over," he was saying excitedly, "we can dispense with all of that surveillance rubbish and start getting back to what we originally planned to do. Everything's selling like hotcakes—people just want to laugh, you know?"

Hermione was talking to Mr. Weasley about her job prospects, while Ron listened next to Harry, looking moody.

"You know that both of you are *more* than welcome to come and work at the Ministry at any

time," Mr. Weasley was saying. Ron seemed to perk up at this news. "Yeah, Hermione," he enthused, "Dad's right. The Ministry needs you."

Hermione shot Ron a quick, pained look, and Mr. Weasley looked over at his son, as if to make a comment that perhaps Ron might consider applying for a job at the Ministry as well, but Harry was relieved to see that Mr. Weasley had the good sense not to say anything. Ron was fiercely proud of his job at the Snout's Fair.

Sirius was between Remus and Harry and not saying much. He looked a bit tired and Harry felt a twinge of guilt, knowing that Sirius was working himself too hard at Azkaban and Culparrat. Harry thought briefly of offering to go and help Sirius in his work with the prisoners, but then he remembered Quidditch and pushed the thought as far back of his mind as it would go.

Remus, on the other hand, looked perfectly at peace as he spread butter onto a roll and surveyed the table around him. Harry realized that his old professor had grown a little younger-looking since the beginning of summer—or maybe it was just the boyish grin on his face, as he leaned forward and said something inaudible to Sirius. Sirius immediately brightened as well, raised an eyebrow, and quietly said something back. Remus snickered, Sirius laughed, and Harry felt oddly content, watching them.

Mrs. Weasley was sitting on the other side of Ginny and next to her sat Fred, who was uncharacteristically subdued. Mrs. Weasley kept trying to engage him and Angelina into conversation, but they both said little and looked a bit nervous.

"How's Penelope?" Harry asked Mrs. Weasley, and she turned her attention to him.

"Oh! Wonderful dear, thank you for asking! She was feeling a bit under the weather today, you know—a witch in her condition has to be very careful—so she decided to stay home, although she sends her regards."

Fred and Angelina, Harry noticed, were now whispering rather heatedly to each other. Mrs. Weasley had just asked Harry about Quidditch tryouts and Harry was just about to answer her, when Fred uttered in exasperation, "Oh, all right then!" and stood up at the table.

Everyone stopped talking to stare at him, although, from the smirk he caught on George's face out of the corner of his eye, Harry had a feeling that George knew exactly what was coming next. Fred stepped a few steps away from his mother, closer to Angelina, and Harry reflected that it was quite funny that he should still be frightened of his mother after fighting in a war. Fred reached into his pocket and pulled something out of it, and Angelina did the same. Harry saw something glint in the sunlight and he realized that it was a ring. Fred cleared his throat and said very shortly, "Mum, Dad, everyone—er, well, the thing is, Angelina and I got married two weeks ago."

There was silence except for a loud gasp from Mrs. Weasley, who was now clutching her heart. Harry looked around and noticed that Mr. Weasley, still holding a forkful of vegetables, was trying very, very hard not to laugh. After what seemed like an eternity, Mrs. Weasley broke the silence with a sob, "Oh! Fred! Angelina! How could you? How? Didn't you think we'd want to be there?" Her eyes narrowing, Mrs. Weasley turned to look past Ginny at George. "Did you know about this?" she demanded.

"Of course!" George answered brightly. "I was the witness *and* I was the one who made them carry through on their bet."

"*What* bet?!" Mrs. Weasley screeched. George looked unaffected.

"I bet Fred and Angelina that if we sold over one-hundred trick wands within the first two weeks of the end of the war, then they would have to get married. And we sold one-hundred and *three* in the *first* week."

Mrs. Weasley gasped again, presumably shocked at her son's lack of remorse, and turned in preparation to launch into Fred, but to Harry's surprise, Fred seemed to have regained his courage. Angelina was now standing, and holding Fred's arm, and Fred held out his other hand to his mother, gesturing her to wait.

"Mum," he said, in a voice that was more serious than Harry had ever heard exit either of the twins' mouths. "We just felt like the time was right. I'm sorry we didn't tell you, but please understand," Fred looked over at Angelina, who winked at him and grinned, "we love each other very much, and, well, it just felt right."

Angelina was smiling, although she looked like she might cry, and she leaned forward and said, "Please, Molly, *do* forgive us. I didn't want to upset you, but I seem to lose my head a bit when Fred's around."

At that point, Mrs. Weasley started to cry, and Angelina started to cry, and Mr. Weasley finally put down his fork and walked around the table to congratulate the couple. Ginny was punching George on the arm for not telling her and Ron was looking delighted, as though pleased that one of his brothers had done something less than perfect.

* * * * *

After all of the excitement had died down over Fred and Angelina's announcement, everyone seemed to remember that it was, indeed, Harry's birthday.

"Which do you want first, Harry?" Sirius asked, clapping him on the back. "Presents or cake?"

It was a difficult decision, but Harry decided on "Presents first, please" and Remus and Mrs. Weasley started to clear the table while Sirius and Ron ran inside to collect all of the gifts.

A few minutes later, a large pile of brightly wrapped packages appeared on the table, and Harry's eyes opened wide at the shock of it all.

"You all—you really didn't—" he started, but George interrupted him. "Oi, shut up and open up Harry. Let's just say we owe you one. Here, open ours first." George pushed a very bright, very loud red and pink package towards Harry. "It's from me and Fred and Angelina," he added.

Feeling a bit apprehensive, Harry started to unwrap the gift, holding it a bit away from him. When it was unwrapped, he stared at it, astonished. On the table before him stood a perfect model of a Quidditch field. Seven miniature players stood at either end of the field, clutching tiny broomsticks. One set was wearing scarlet robes and the other—green. "Go on," prompted Fred. "Tell them 'Let the game begin!'"

"Er, 'Let the game begin!'" said Harry, looking down at the players. A referee appeared in the center of the field with a wooden box, and opening it, released two Bludgers, one Quaffle, and one Golden Snitch into the air. The players mounted their brooms and flew off.

"Wow!" Ron exclaimed.

"Yeah," Harry echoed, transfixed.

"We're branching out," explained Fred. "Magical games. You can choose the robes and the names of the teams. You can also select certain players to play for each team. We've got all the famous ones enchanted in there. So, if you want to see a team with Ludo Bagman, Catriona McCormack, and Viktor Krum," Fred stopped and winked across the table at Ron, who scowled, "then all you have to do is say so before the game starts."

"This is a pre-release copy Harry," explained George. "There's a serial number on the bottom." Harry looked at the base of the Quidditch pitch and noticed a golden "1" stamped in the wood.

"The whole thing was actually Angelina's idea," said Fred proudly. "We worked on it during the war when we needed a break."

"Thanks!" said Harry earnestly, already mentally forming teams in his head. He stared at the game for a few more moments, and then, remembering that there were other presents to be opened, he pushed the game over to Ron, who was eyeing it with great interest.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley gave Harry a new set of dark green robes ("To bring out your eyes, dear.") Hermione handed him a book—*Common Quidditch Injuries and Charms to Prevent Them*—while Ron offered him a bottle of "Goldie's Liquid Curse", the alcohol in the green bottle that had made him so drunk earlier in the month. Remus added to the collection by giving Harry a small wizarding alarm clock that shouted, in a voice very like Oliver Wood's, "Oi, Potter! Get your lazy arse out of that bed!"

"I thought it might motivate you," said Remus serenely.

When they'd all finished laughing, Ginny shyly handed Harry his present and sat twisting her fingers as he opened it. It was a slim, attractive looking book with a flattering picture of Harry, riding his Firebolt, on the front of it. The picture appeared to have been painted and the sky around him swirled and moved as he flew back and forth across the cover. In gold and silver lettering across the bottom was written, *Thoughts of Harry, compiled by Ginny Weasley in honor of his eighteenth birthday.*

Harry looked up in amazement and noticed that Ginny was now blushing so furiously that it was difficult to tell where her forehead ended and her hair began. He grinned at her and she smiled weakly back. Not sure what to expect, Harry opened the book to the first page. There was a wizard photograph of himself, Ron, and Hermione, taken during the beginning of their fifth year, looking very happy and silly as they prepared to head to the Halloween feast, followed by a short explanation of the book itself. Ginny had apparently gone to all of Harry's friends and asked them to write about a memory of him, or else to provide a picture—she explained that Dean Thomas had drawn the front cover, and Seamus Finnigan had written a small piece inside. Parvati Patil had written a rather humorous account of their "date" to the Yule Ball, thanking him for allowing her the freedom to meet Pierre Bardot of Beauxbatons, and enclosing one of her hair ribbons from that evening. Neville Longbottom had enclosed a list of all of the passwords ever used to enter Gryffindor tower while they were at Hogwarts 'compiled with the much appreciated assistance of the Fat Lady, who sends her regards as well'. So that's why Ginny was talking to Neville the other day, Harry realized, relieved to know the explanation.

Slowly, as everyone else returned to laughing together and eating, Harry skimmed through his book and tried to process all the kind things that had been written for him. There was a note from Mrs. Weasley in which she told him that she would always consider him a son in her heart, and one from Mr. Weasley thanking Harry for all of his insights over the years into Muggle affairs. Sirius and Remus had put their heads together to compile a "Marauders Map" of Lupin Lodge, so that Harry would always know when the toilet was free. Harry snorted with laughter, then glanced at Ginny, who was the only one still watching him.

"So, happy birthday," she said, meeting his eyes, though she was still twisting her fingers in her lap.

"Thanks," he said quietly, leaning toward her slightly to make sure she could hear him over the din of chattering around them. "This was a great idea. Really." He looked down at the book, which he had almost finished skimming, and turned the last page.

"No—why don't you finish reading it later—" Ginny attempted, but it was too late. Harry had already seen that on the last page was written a very short entry, in Ginny's handwriting. He adjusted his glasses unnecessarily, suddenly feeling both incredibly curious and very nervous. He was half-afraid she'd written something like the long-ago Valentine, and half-afraid that she hadn't. He peered apprehensively at the pretty cursive.

*Harry,
I am here.
Love,
Ginny*

Blushing more furiously than he would have been if Ginny had written a twenty-page love letter, Harry glanced up only to find Ginny looking at him questioningly. He stared back for a long moment, his head swimming with questions of his own. "I... thanks," he managed briefly, feeling like an idiot for his speechlessness.

She nodded, and turned away.

Harry was relieved a split-second later, when Sirius hollered, "My turn!" His godfather pulled his wand and shot the only package that was left on the table into Harry's hands. There was a card stuck to the top of it, and Harry opened that first.

He read to himself:

*Dear Harry,
Your parents gave this to me shortly before their deaths. I was instructed to hold onto it, in case anything happened to them, until your seventeenth birthday. Unfortunately, things were rather hectic last year and I didn't think of it until just now. It's been in my Gringotts vault all these years. I'm not even sure what it is, although if it's what I think it is, we should have quite a lot of entertainment for this evening.
Happy Birthday,
Sirius*

Harry didn't say anything for a moment—he just stared at the package on the table in front of him. Finally, he gulped, and announced to everyone sitting around the table, "It's from my mum and dad." Sirius nudged Harry with his elbow and said, "Go on then, open it up."

Harry eased off the paper surrounding the gift. Soon he had uncovered what appeared to be a plain picture frame, with a photograph of his father and mother. They were both smiling and waving at him, and Harry gazed at it intensely. This had belonged to his mother and father. They had touched this. And there they were. Harry had so few pictures of his parents that each one was like a treasure to him. He looked over at his godfather and whispered, "Thanks, Sirius." To his surprise, Sirius laughed.

"Just as I thought! That's not all, Harry! But perhaps we should have the cake on the table before I show you how to work this thing."

"Work it?" asked Harry, puzzled.

"Yes," answered Sirius. "That's not just a photograph—it's a Kinolia."

"A what?" asked Harry, even more confused, but he noticed that Fred, George, Ron, and Mr. Weasley had all uttered "Cool!" and "Wish I had one of those!" under their breath. Harry was used, even after eight years in the wizarding world, to not knowing many things that might be common knowledge amongst people in wizarding families.

"A Kinolia," explained Mr. Weasley excitedly. "It's the wizard version of a Muggle *film*."
"Film?"

"Yes, you know, their version of moving stories."

Harry was floored. He was holding in his hands a device that would show him not only stationary versions of his parents, waving and smiling, but something that might enable him to hear them speak, and laugh, and move. He didn't want to wait for cake, although Mrs. Weasley had already brought an enormous one to the table.

"How'd you work it Sirius?" he asked eagerly.

"I'm not sure if I even remember. Remus is the brains behind the whole thing—do you reckon you can work it out?"

"I think so," replied Remus. He surveyed the ground in front of them and muttered "*Accio!*" Soon, several blankets were flying out of an upstairs window of Lupin Lodge and spreading out on the ground below. "We should sit in a circle," he explained. "It's easier to watch that way."

Still clutching the frame in his hands, and feeling too excited to bring the slice of cake that Mrs. Weasley had placed in front of him, Harry made his way over to the blankets. It was getting dark now, but Harry didn't mind. Everyone else soon followed, Mr. Weasley making a grunting noise as he tried to get down on the ground. Ginny was the last one over, and Harry noticed that everyone seemed to have left a space for her next to him. She sat down gingerly, curling her legs up under her.

"Harry, place the Kinolia in the center there," Remus instructed and Harry did so.

"Now," directed Remus. "I think that all you have to do is point your wand at it and order it to play. Give it a try."

Harry extracted his wand from the back pocket of his jeans and pointed it at the frame. Eyes fixed on the identical ones belonging to his mother, he said loudly, "Play!" and watched as mist appeared to float out of the picture. Soon, he heard the sound of a woman laughing, and heard Ginny gasp slightly. Floating above everyone were James and Lily Potter, looking solid and young and healthy and happy, despite the fact that they were floating a few feet above the ground.

"Is it working, Remus?" Harry heard a voice ask from above. It was his father's voice. He had only heard his father's voice twice before, and both of those times, it had been filled with a sense of fear and urgency. Now, it was filled with amusement.

Remus on the ground grinned, as they heard a younger version of his voice reply, "I think I've got it this time."

"Right," said James Potter, walking around behind his wife and encircling her waist with his arms, "Go on then Lily."

Harry watched his mother laugh, and her face grew larger as the Kinolia zoomed in on it, while the rest of her body seemed to float away in the mist. She cleared her throat and began, "Hello Harry ... or ... Honora... we're not sure which you'll be yet, as you're currently about this big..." she held up her thumb and index finger in front of her face and squinted. "But we know you're there, and we want to keep a complete record of your entire life for you, so Daddy—" here she stopped and turned to beam back at her husband, "Daddy went out and bought this Kinolia for you."

There was a loud *Thud!* as Lily and James Potter's faces fell out of view and what appeared to be grass and some shabby-looking shoes came into focus.

"You're *pregnant?*" they heard a young Remus exclaim. "Really?"

Everyone on the ground turned to look at Remus, who was shaking with laughter at this point. He shrugged his shoulders and kept laughing, and everyone turned their attention back to the figures in the center of the circle.

The grass had faded away, and James and Lily Potter were standing in the center once again, but this time, Lily Potter looked much larger than she had before. She was standing sideways and grinning.

"Well, my child," she was saying. "You've gone and ruined my figure, but I love you anyway."

They heard laughter from behind the camera, but this time, there were three voices—Remus, Sirius, and—Harry jumped inwardly—Peter Pettigrew.

"Let me have a go." The voice definitely belonged to Peter. "You two go and stand with Lily." Harry felt himself shudder slightly. He didn't want Peter Pettigrew anywhere near his parents. He felt like reaching out to the solid looking figures in front of him and pulling them away—warning them. Involuntarily he reached out his fingers as if to touch them, before realizing that there was nothing solid to touch.

Quickly he pulled back his hand, his heart lurching with a sick helplessness. He opened his mouth to say that he would watch the rest of the Kinolia later, that he didn't want to see this anymore—but before he could speak, he felt something cool and smooth cover his fingers on the blanket. He looked down and saw Ginny's pale hand on top of his and felt the bottom drop out from

his stomach. But he didn't want her to move—not at all. Tentatively, he turned his palm upward and laced his fingers slightly through hers, letting out his breath, which he realized that he'd been holding in. The Kinolia could keep playing, he decided briefly, feeling a shock run up his arm when Ginny moved her thumb along his index finger, just barely. The Kinolia could keep playing for the rest of the night.

Harry's eyes darted quickly around the circle of his friends, searching to see if anyone had noticed what had just happened, but to his relief they were all riveted by the image of a young Sirius Black, who had loomed up above them. Harry looked at his godfather, sitting on the ground opposite him, and saw that his eyes were glistening. The Sirius that was now laughing out of the Kinolia was young, strong, and dashing. His hair was longer and his black robes were cut fashionably. He put his ear down to Lily Potter's bulging middle and said, "What's that? Really? You do? Very interesting..." Looking up, Sirius winked at James and said, "Harry would like his present now." Lily opened her mouth, just about to ask something, when James held out his hand and said, "Moony! Bring in the gift!" A moment later, Remus appeared, looking much younger also—his hair was entirely brown—with a very small broomstick in his hand.

"James!" exclaimed Lily, shaking her head. "All of you! This child is not even born yet, *and*," she added, pointing at Sirius, "we do *not* know if it is a boy or a girl yet. Either way, our child is *not* getting on a broomstick before it can walk. I've been reading up on it and Dr. Pedetria clearly states that children who fly before walking..."

"Yes, yes, we know *all* about Dr. Pedetria, don't we *Harry*," said James, kissing his wife's neck. "She's an *expert*." The laughter faded, as did the figures in front of them, and slowly, another vision, almost too dark to see, filled the air above the ground.

First they saw a dim figure, and heard a voice say softly, "Damn! How hard can this be to figure out? I hope it's working." Then they saw Lily Potter's face appear in front of them. She appeared to be sitting in a darkened room.

"Hello, Harry," she said softly. "I know that you're a boy, even though I give James a hard time about it. He's too arrogant sometimes, even though most of the time he *is* right about things." She sighed deeply and looked down. "James doesn't want you to know about the dark times that we live in, but my hope is that by the time you are old enough to see this, the darkness will be gone, and I think it's important to understand."

Lily looked off to her side for a moment, and when she turned her head back towards the Kinolia, her eyes were bright. "Your father isn't here right now. I don't know where he is. He can't tell me. The truth is, we are in the middle of a war. It's a terrible war, and I am so afraid. Every time your father leaves, I'm afraid he won't come back. That's a real danger, you know?" She laughed a bit and continued. "Of course you don't know—you're a baby, or, I hope you will be in two weeks. You are completely innocent. You are what is keeping me sane. Always know that your mother loves you very, very much."

She sat and stared at the air in front of her for what seemed like an eternity. Harry dully heard Mrs. Weasley sniffing and for a moment he wished everyone would just go away. He pulled his knees up in front of him, pulled his hand out from underneath Ginny's, and grasped at his hair with both of his hands, not thinking of anything in particular.

Soon, however, another, much brighter scene was forming. "It's a boy! It's a boy! I was *right*! Padfoot, where the heck is that broom?" James Potter's voice rang out clearly through the night air. James turned to face the Kinolia. "My wife is the most amazing, beautiful, brave, wonderful witch on the entire planet!"

Sirius appeared in front of the camera, threw his arm around James's shoulders, and held up the tiny broomstick from the earlier scene in his other hand. "I am a godfather!" he announced proudly. "And as godfather, I am allowed to give the boy his broomstick!" A muffled sound came from behind the Kinolia. Sirius scowled in a friendly manner. "We are *not* drunk Mr. Lupin. Not at all! I know that's why you're laughing, so you can just stop right now."

"Where's Peter?" asked James, slurring his words slightly.

"Dunno," shrugged Sirius. "Hey! Can we go in and record the baby?"

James held his finger to his lips and said, "Shhhh...sleeping..." but he opened the door behind them and they saw Lily Potter sleeping in a large bed. Next to her, in a small cradle, was a tiny, tiny bundle with a shock of dark, black hair. "Bloody hell, James!" exclaimed Sirius, loudly, and James shushed him again, "You gave the poor kid your hair."

"Yeah, well, he's got Lily's eyes," James said defiantly, "so he'll never have to worry about these ruddy things." James pointed a finger at his glasses and grimaced.

On the ground, Fred and George laughed in unison.

"Wait a second..." The Sirius in the Kinolia seemed to be pondering something and his face lit

up brightly. "Remus, what day is today?"

"Why, I believe that it's July 31st," answered Remus, and Harry could hear the grin from behind the Kinolia.

"That's right," said Sirius, spinning round to look at James, "and that means that you owe us some money, Prongs. Surely you haven't forgotten our bet?"

"A man after my own heart!" called out Fred delightedly.

Harry watched as his father squirmed uncomfortably, shooting a glance at his wife, who was lying in the bed, apparently still asleep. "Well, let's talk about it outside, shall we?" James motioned to baby Harry, as if to indicate that they would wake him.

"All right," agreed Sirius. "Remus, let's get this down for the official record, shall we?"

"Mmmhmm," said Remus, following them out of the room. All that was visible was the backs of their heads.

"Pay up James!" Sirius said as they exited the room.

"I don't think it proves anything. That due date is just arbitrary. Just because Harry was born today, doesn't mean that..."

"Don't try to talk your way out of this one, Potter. Just pay up. Ten Galleons, wasn't it Moony?"

"I believe so."

"Remus," James hissed, "surely you can see that this is all very silly..."

"I lost a lot of sleep that night as well, James." Remus sounded like he was trying to hold his laughter in. Harry glanced over to where Remus and Sirius were sitting on the ground and both of them were shaking with suppressed laughter. Harry wondered where this whole conversation was leading.

"Fine," James dug into his pocket. "So evidence points to the notion that my son was conceived on Halloween. Big deal. I don't see why it's so funny. I don't see why it's worth discussing over and over again. Actually—" James straightened and grinned a bit, "it could have been any day in the week before or after Halloween as well. *Any day.*"

On the ground, Harry blushed and Ron snorted.

"It's not particularly funny, James," answered Sirius, ignoring James's comment and dividing the gold into two piles and handing one to the Remus behind the Kinolia, "except that you're very fun to tease, and you *were* being very loud after that Halloween party. Don't worry, we'll use the money to buy a nice gift for Harry."

The scene faded. Everyone in the circle on the ground was now laughing. Harry wasn't really sure how he felt. Watching his parents on the Kinolia was, to a certain extent, painful. It just reinforced something that Harry had always suspected—that his parents were good, decent people, whom he would have like to get to know better, and that was never going to happen. And the reason for that was Peter Pettigrew, who was laughing and joking with them. On the other hand, he was thoroughly enjoying watching his godfather and his teacher enjoying their youth—before it had been snatched away from them. Harry looked around. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were sitting next to each other, smiling. Ron had his long legs stretched out in front of him, one arm propping himself up and the other wrapped around Hermione. Fred and Angelina were holding hands, and George was staring off into space looking quite content. Remus and Sirius were whispering to each other and laughing a bit—Harry assumed that watching the Kinolia must evoke the same emotions in them.

Turning his head slightly, Harry saw Ginny out of the corner of his eye. Her legs were still curled under her. Her right hand picked at the piece of cake on her plate as she stared down at it. The other hand was picking at the grass on the ground next to her. It was white and girlish against the grass and Harry had an unexplainable urge to reach out and hold it again, knowing that it might make him feel better. But for some reason, he just couldn't make himself do it. Reluctantly, he turned his attention back to the swirling image above him.

Image upon image appeared on the Kinolia. Harry saw himself crying fretfully for no apparent reason at all. He watched Sirius levitate him using the Wingardium Leviosa charm. His parents danced, laughed, and smiled. His mother read him a bedtime story and sang to him. She was beautiful and calm and patient and he was a part of her. It was very difficult to take in at once. Harry wondered idly whether or not Professor Dumbledore's Pensieve was still in the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts. He felt that he could use one of his own about now.

There was a picnic. Everyone was outside, enjoying the day. People were swimming in a lake. Peter Pettigrew must have been holding the Kinolia, because first Harry saw himself being tossed between his mother and his father. Then the image panned to two figures sitting on a hill a bit away from everyone else—Remus and Sirius. Both looked glum and Harry looked over to their present-day selves to see if he could discern why. He saw Sirius reach out and touch Remus on the arm. Remus looked up and gave a small smile, and Sirius smiled back, withdrew his hand, and both turned to

continue watching.

And then, the Kinolia stopped playing. Harry felt the blood drain from his face. He hadn't wanted it to stop. That meant that the scene at the lake was not long before his parents had died. Indeed, the Harry playing in the water had looked to be about a year old. That had been summer—his parents had died at the end of October. They must have been too busy hiding to use the Kinolia more often during the following months. There was a sort of silence outside, and for a few moments, Harry could hear nothing but the summer insects. Finally, Ginny rose and began gathering cake plates together. She Banished them into the kitchen and Mrs. Weasley also rose and began lighting lanterns around the garden. Everyone started chattering again. Harry picked up the Kinolia and held it protectively under his arm. Ron and Hermione came over to him, Ron wearing a big lopsided grin.

"So, you're a Halloween baby, Harry?" he smirked.

Hermione hit him. "It's really not that funny, Ron. No point starting teasing him about it. You'd think you'd have worked it out before now."

"You mean *you* worked it out and you didn't say anything? We could have celebrated Harry's "Conception Day" along with Nearly Headless Nick's Deathday all these years..."

"I'm sure Harry would have *loved* that, wouldn't you Harry?"

Harry shrugged.

Mrs. Weasley came out into the garden, a large brown package hovering in front of her. She deposited it on the table. It looked as though it had been delivered by Muggle post—it was addressed very neatly to "Harry Potter", and had about fifteen stamps on it.

"This arrived for you today, dear," Mrs. Weasley explained. "I'd almost forgotten it. I've no idea who it could be from. It came by Muggle post earlier today, and the man who delivered it seemed very confused." But she sounded a bit too cheerful. Harry could think of only one person, or rather, family, who would send him something in the Muggle way, although he hadn't expected to hear anything from them on his birthday.

Slowly, he examined the parcel. The neat handwriting on the front definitely belonged to his Aunt Petunia. By the looks of it, she had wrapped it as well. The brown paper was plain and coarse, but the ends were taped very, very neatly and it appeared that no extra paper or tape had been wasted in wrapping this "gift."

Ginny appeared at Harry's side. "Go on," she urged, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear, "maybe it'll be another tissue—Mum could use one, look, she's still all watery-eyed from the Kinolia."

"I most certainly am not," protested Mrs. Weasley, with a snuffle.

Harry grinned wryly—tissues were the Dursleys' standard idea of a gift for their nephew. Harry doubted very much, however, whether the Dursleys would waste an entire box on something so small. The box didn't feel heavy at all. Harry picked it up and shook it lightly. "Maybe it's just air," he joked.

Harry unwrapped the parcel only to find an old, beat-up shoebox underneath. A piece of paper was taped to the lid. Harry ripped it off, pulling away some of the box with it, hoping desperately that the box did not really contain an old pair of Uncle Vernon's shoes or a collection of his oldest, smelliest socks. It read:

We were cleaning out our attic and found these. They belong to you. If you do not want them, please do not send them back.

Vernon and Petunia Dursley

Well, Harry thought, *fine with me*. He was sure that he was happier to be away from the Dursleys than they were to be rid of him. Curious, Harry lifted the lid to the box. Inside was a blue blanket. Harry touched it carefully, not quite comprehending what it was. Sirius had now appeared on his other side, and everyone else had gathered across the table to see what the Dursleys had sent. Harry looked over to Sirius curiously, wondering if he knew what it meant. Sirius was staring at the blanket with an empty look. His eyes were as dark and hooded as they had been the first time Harry had seen him in the Shrieking Shack. Remus placed a hand on Sirius's shoulder.

"It's the blanket that Hagrid wrapped you in before he took you to the Dursleys," Sirius said quietly. "I showed up and saw...saw the house, and realized what had happened, and I saw Hagrid there, wrapping you in these blankets."

Sirius stopped talking for a moment, and Harry did not speak either. Sirius took a small breath and continued. "When I saw Hagrid, I knew that Dumbledore must have sent him. He comforted me, he was wailing quite loudly himself—I thought he was going to drown you with those big tears of his. Then I told him to give you to me—that I was your godfather. But he said that Dumbledore had instructed him to take you to him, and I knew that something strange was going on, but I agreed."

Harry lifted the blankets out of the box. They were dusty and wrinkled, but as he lifted them, a small piece of parchment flitted out of them. Sirius picked it up with trembling fingers. "I had a feeling that you never discovered this," he said with a bitter edge to his voice.

"I'm surprised that the Dursleys didn't burn these like they did my letter from Dumbledore," Harry said angrily. "Why'd they keep these, I wonder?"

"Probably hoping they'd be able to send you back in them," suggested Ron.

"Ron," hissed Hermione and Mrs. Weasley simultaneously, but Harry smiled a bit and picked up on the bait. "Yeah, maybe that's why they kept me in the closet all those years, so that I'd fit into my blankets."

Sirius handed Harry the piece of parchment. "Before I gave Hagrid my motorbike, I scribbled this and stuck it into your blankets. I didn't know what was going to happen, but I had a feeling that I wouldn't be seeing you for a while."

Harry picked up the paper and read aloud:

Be safe, Harry. I'll come for you as soon as I can. It's probably better that Hagrid wouldn't let me bring you with me, but I would have, Harry. Know that I would have. Someday, you will understand.

*Your godfather,
Sirius Black*

"Well," said Harry after he'd finished reading, "if I'd had that, it would have cleared up quite a lot, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, I dunno," said Ron cheerfully, "we still would have thought he was a Muggle-killing lunatic and he still probably would've broken my leg."

Everyone laughed at this and Harry gently folded the blanket and placed it back in the box, laying the note down on top of it. Although anger at the Dursleys was making his stomach churn, he couldn't really feel upset for long. He was too full and exhausted, and anyway, the blankets *had* belonged to him, *and* he'd seen moving pictures of his mother and father—he'd heard them laugh, heard them speak...

One by one, party guests started to leave. Fred, George, and Angelina departed first, after much fuss from Mrs. Weasley. Ron, Hermione and Ginny excused themselves to go help Remus rearrange things inside. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley stood in the garden for quite some time, talking with Harry and Sirius. Mr. Weasley was just in the middle of telling Sirius that he might be able to find his old motorbike, when he stopped talking suddenly and his mouth turned grim.

Harry turned his head so that he could see what had caused Mr. Weasley's sudden change of mood and saw Draco Malfoy in the distance, standing on the balcony of his uncle's house. Malfoy's silver-blond hair reflected in the moonlight and glowed. Mrs. Weasley gently placed a hand on her husband's arm and said softly, "Shall we be going now Arthur?" Mr. Weasley nodded, and the two of them said goodnight and Disapparated.

Now only Sirius and Harry were left in the garden.

"Did you have a happy birthday, Harry?" asked Sirius. Though he was smiling, the gravity in his voice made Harry think of the letter that Sirius had sent him a month ago.

"You know that I have had my doubts as to whether I would ever be free to do my godfatherly duties by you. But Harry, now that I am, it's going to be the way it should have been all along. I promise you that."

Harry glanced up at Malfoy, who was still standing on the balcony alone, and reflected that living with the Dursleys all those years might have been worth it after all. It was better than being indulged as a child and ending up a lonely adult. Harry rubbed his hand absently where Ginny had touched it, and thought of the messages and gifts that had been piled up in his honor. At least he wasn't lonely.

Realizing that Sirius was still waiting quietly for an answer, Harry shook himself out of his thoughts and looked at his godfather. "This was the best birthday I've had," he said simply.

Sirius grinned, unable to hide his relief. "Good. Now, tell me what's happening with the Cannons. I haven't heard anything yet."

Together, discussing Harry's favorite subject, they strolled back into the house.

— CHAPTER TEN —

Echoes of War

Fleur Delacour was bored with men. She stood before one now in the Paris conference room of Charismatics Spellcraft International, bored out of her mind. She rested one hand on her hip and gazed disinterestedly out the window as Mr. Craftsworthy, the Staffing Specialist from the London office, spoke to her about employment opportunities.

“...there are more assignments than we can possibly handle,” he was saying. “Too many places where the Protection Enchantments have been destroyed by Death Eaters. Whole staff is busy—supply and demand, you know—Camille Jaloux has given us your name, and I do hope you’ll consider...” The man trailed off and looked at Fleur. He had to be sixty at least and the ardent way in which he stared at her would have made most young women uncomfortable.

It bored Fleur.

“Just tell me what it is zat you want me to do. I want to leave ‘ere,” she snapped. And though many superior business partners would have fired her on the spot for her cheek, the man at the table continued to gaze at her worshipfully, utterly unaffected by her tone.

It had used to amaze Fleur, when she was a child, the level of pettish cruelty she could inflict on men without their even minding. After it had ceased to amaze her, it had amused her—she’d made a game of it. How cold could she be before they would dare to contradict her? How selfishly could she act before they would give up? But no matter what she said, or how horribly she behaved, it didn’t matter. They never noticed. They always gazed at her glassily, always nodded and accommodated and fetched and were *boring*. Terribly disappointing creatures, men.

“Never listen to them, darling,” her grandmother had said firmly, again and again. “Never trust them. They are all far too easily distracted.”

Fleur remembered the hard bite with which the words had always been spoken. “You are fortunate, little one, to be only part-veela. You may use the magic only at your will. But *I*, who will never know that freedom, have learned not to believe a word they say. And neither should you.”

Fleur’s mother had regarded that advice as somewhat harsh—she had told Fleur that though it was true most men would be weakened by her, one would surely happen along who was less easily impressed by beauty. There *were* honest men in the world, she had always averred. Fleur’s own father, after all, had been such a man.

But, harsh or not, by the age of eleven Fleur had been grateful for her grandmother’s warning. In her first year at Beauxbatons Academy, the boys had come at her in droves. All of them, through to the seventh years, spent their energy trying to commandeer her time; Fleur quickly found that if she wanted to study at all, she would have to isolate herself in her room. And as if all of that was not disconcerting enough for such a young girl, Fleur had also been only eleven when a boy had first attempted to kiss her. *Really* kiss her. It had frightened her to death.

After a letter to her mother and a tearful interview with the Headmistress, Fleur had become more careful, and more isolated—and much more cunning.

Time and experience had made her almost diabolical about it. If there was anything she wanted, she could have it if there were men about. And if she wanted to be kissed—which, eventually, she did—there was no shortage of candidates for the provision of strong arms, a mouth, and a lot of promises. She more or less knew the speech by heart: they liked to tell her how beautiful she was, that they loved her and would die for her. At first it had been interesting to hear it, in all its versions. But in recent years, whenever they used the word ‘love’, Fleur had to suppress a snort. How could they possibly love her? Not a one of them had bothered to *know* her. And even though, in the past, it had been rather entertaining to kiss them and then watch them run in circles for no reason at all, that had now become boring as well.

Fleur had honestly begun to wonder whether there were any other men in the world like her

father had been. She wondered if any of them would ever stop looking at her hair long enough to listen to her speak. She wondered if any of them would ever stand up to her. Because the way it stood now, things were just as her grandmother had warned her they would be. Fleur found it absolutely impossible to believe a word that any of them said.

All but one. She admitted that there had been one.

"...to London. Mademoiselle. Mademoiselle Delacour, are you listening to me?"

Fleur opened her eyes, annoyed to be interrupted from her reverie. She looked down at Mr. Craftsworthy disdainfully and told the truth. "Non. I 'av not 'eard a word you 'av said. Can you not sum up? I am sick of standing 'ere."

He smiled indulgently. Of course. Fleur let out a breath of impatience.

"Gringotts Bank," he said, tapping his notebook with his quill and not taking his eyes off of her, "is in need of extra help—many of the Protective Enchantments have been destroyed."

Fleur shrugged loosely. A bank? Fine. She didn't really care. "I was under ze impression zat Gringotts employed curses for protection, not Charms," was her only reply.

"Well, yes—in the vaults. But then there are personnel chambers, you know. International Services rooms, Muggle currency exchange experts, curse breakers' offices—that sort of thing. The human employees would rather have their quarters enchanted than cursed. Not everyone is as comfortable with curses as the goblins are."

Fleur nodded. She wouldn't want to work surrounded by a lot of curses, herself. Dark magic of any kind was the last thing she wanted to be near now. Dark magic was only a reminder of the past, and she wanted no reminders, not now, not this autumn, when the war was finally beginning to lose its razor's-edge hold on her. The war had been over all summer.

Not that time had brought Gabrielle back.

Fleur felt tears sting her eyes immediately, as they always did when she thought of her sister. She tried not to dwell on it, tried not to imagine the things Gabrielle might have suffered after she had been taken from Mont Ste. Mireille. Fleur hated to imagine any child at the hands of a Death Eater, but the acute, writhing sickness it caused to think of Gabrielle—the sheer terror that her sister must have felt, and the pain... It was a horrible thing, to have to hope that a loved one had been killed quickly and mercifully. But Fleur did hope it. She hoped that they had killed Gabrielle on the spot, from behind and without warning—that she had been an unsuspecting victim—that her last memories had been happy ones. That hope was all that had given Fleur any comfort since January.

"...in the morning. Mademoiselle, I think you are, perhaps, not quite listening?" Mr. Craftsworthy beamed at her, as if she had done something wonderful. "Come, come, hear what I am offering you. There is a transfer available—"

"To Gringotts of Paris. I was listening, Monsieur."

"Ah—no—" he looked extremely nervous to have to contradict her "—to Gringott's of *London*, Mademoiselle Delacour. I do beg your pardon, but it is Gringotts in London that needs you—I have several senior Enchantment Experts staffing the Paris branch already."

Fleur's eyes narrowed. "You are saying zat I am not qualified to work 'ere in France?"

The man immediately began to apologize profusely. "Good heavens no! I didn't mean it in such a way—do forgive me—that is, you *are* very young—but so talented, of course!"

Fleur waved him off. It was unimportant to her what he thought of her work. She knew that she was brilliant. She had only wanted to make him suffer a little bit, for underestimating her.

"I accept," she said briefly, in the manner of a queen pardoning her page.

Mr. Craftsworthy was clearly relieved and grateful to her for not having chastised him further. "The—the transfer? You'll accept the position at Gringotts?"

"Oui." Fleur studied her nails and sighed.

"Excellent!" Mr. Craftsworthy clapped his hands together. "I will forward the appropriate papers to Madame Jaloux, regarding the transfer, and I'll have your identification to your desk by the end of the month. You will begin in the second week of September. Is that an acceptable amount of time in which to make your plans?" He gazed at her imploringly.

Fleur nodded once, then turned and left the conference room without another glance, feeling almost pleased for the first time in months. She had an assignment. Something new to focus on. Mont Ste. Mireille was nothing but a daily, living reminder of Gabrielle, and Fleur was grateful for an opportunity to move away from it. London... well, it certainly wasn't *Paris*... but it would be different, at least. The *men* would not be different, of course. Fleur snorted softly. They never were. But a change of scene was actually welcome in any case. And also, Bill Weasley was British.

The thought came to Fleur suddenly before she could stop it, and along with the thought came an odd flutter in her heart. *He* had stood quietly and watched her working without interference. *He*

had held her differently from any other man. Not as if he'd wanted something from her—but as if... as if he'd *known* her. She remembered the pressure of standing against him—the strange, immediate relief of it. She stopped in the corridor for a moment and shut her eyes, forgetting where she was. Yes... he had been British. And he might be in London; it wasn't impossible, was it?

Of course, it was equally as likely that he had lost his life in the war. Fleur flinched at the thought. She didn't want to think about that.

Shaking off all ideas of that nature, therefore, Fleur returned to her desk and sat. She pulled out her wand and organized her papers briefly, realizing as she did so that she wouldn't miss this office in the slightest. London, in September? Well, good. Perhaps, at the very least, it wouldn't be horribly dull.

* * * * *

The day was a bit cool and cloudy for early August, with some light drizzle misting everything. *Perfect*, thought Hermione, *as if this weren't hard enough to deal with already*. She spent some time trying to control her hair, which was bushier than usual due to the weather. After about fifteen minutes, she threw down the clip that she was using to try and pull some of the curls off of her face and murmured in frustration, "What's the use! They're not going to notice anyway."

"I think you look lovely dear," answered her mirror. Hermione managed a weak smile, before grabbing a ribbon, securing what she could of her hair at the bottom of her neck, and heading downstairs.

In the kitchen of the Burrow, Mrs. Weasley, Bill, and Ron were already seated at the table. *Penelope must be sleeping in*, thought Hermione, and she couldn't really blame her—it must be exhausting to carry all of that extra weight around. She had stayed up quite late the night before talking with Penelope about the Imprisonment Charm that Percy and Penelope had begun work on earlier in the year. Mr. Weasley was pressing Penelope to come up with something soon, so that they would have options available to alleviate the situation at Azkaban and Culparrat. Working on it without Percy seemed difficult for Penelope, and she was very frustrated. Hermione wondered if it was the type of thing that a Thinker could help with and found herself feeling even more excited about the prospect of leaving in September.

Mrs. Weasley Summoned a cup of tea and let it land gently in front of Hermione on the table. She smiled gratefully and sat down next to Ron, cradling the cup of tea in her hands, feeling its warmth, but not drinking. While everyone else ate, Hermione stared off into space, trying to prepare herself for the day ahead. As her mind wandered, her eyes rested on Bill Weasley's hair, which was not yet pulled into its customary ponytail. It was fascinating. When worn loose as it was this morning, it fell to his shoulders and reminded Hermione of a soft, full paintbrush soaked in red color. It was equally as pretty as Ginny's hair, but as she watched him eat his eggs while reading the *Daily Prophet*, she decided that it didn't make him look feminine at all. In the two years that she had been coming regularly to the Burrow, she had never heard him mention a girlfriend, although she supposed that it wasn't so odd seeing as he'd been fighting in the war. And anyway, she didn't know him very well. Perhaps he was the type to go out with lots of different girls.

Taking another sip of tea and trying to wake up, Hermione cast a somewhat bothered look at Ron, who was also eating eggs and sitting in a posture similar to his brother's. She narrowed her eyes, wondering briefly if he ever thought about other girls, and then tried to imagine what he would look like with long hair like his brother Bill. George had seemed to be growing his hair when she'd seen him at Harry's birthday party. She smirked a little. No, she definitely couldn't see it. Ron was a short-haired type of boy. The expression on her face must have been odd, as she stared, because Ron stopped mid-chew and demanded, "What?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full, Ron," admonished Mrs. Weasley, rising and dusting off her robes. "It's bad manners."

Ron rolled his eyes and Hermione cracked a smile. Bill looked up from the newspaper and said with a deadpan face, "Yeah Ron, hasn't Hermione ever told you that?"

Hermione felt movement as Ron kicked Bill under the table, the tips of his ears quickly turning pink. Mrs. Weasley hadn't seemed to hear what Bill had said and a burning sensation crossed Hermione's face as she realized the meaning of Bill's joke. She really was part of the family now. Bill obviously had no problem including her in the jokes aimed at his siblings.

Ignoring Ron, Bill piped up, "Hermione, you'll need to work at controlling your boyfriend. He's a bit useless right now, but you've caught him young so I'm sure he'll improve under your influence." Bill winked at her and Hermione gave him a weak smile, unsure of what to say. She wasn't used to having brothers.

Ron was just about to respond, though—Hermione could feel his whole body grow tense—when

Mrs. Weasley walked around behind Bill, poked him in the ribs with her wand, and said gently to Hermione, "Aren't you hungry, Hermione?"

Hermione shook her head. "No."

"Come on now," Mrs. Weasley pressed, placing a plate on the table in front of her. "Best not to go on an empty stomach."

Nodding, Hermione slowly began to pick at a piece of toast. Ron's mum was always watching out for her, just like Ron did, and she was grateful for Mrs. Weasley's support, but she couldn't help but be reminded that her own mother was currently unable to act in that capacity.

Ron and Hermione had always spent the night at the Burrow before visiting St. Mungo's—somehow it made things easier to leave from there. In the beginning, Ron had purposely planned their visits to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries on days when Harry was somehow unavailable. They both knew that he'd want to come with them, and both of them thought it better that he stay as far removed from places like St. Mungo's as possible. Also, selfish as she felt about it, Hermione didn't really want Harry there. Visiting her parents was always extremely difficult for her, and she didn't want the extra worry of watching Harry withdraw further into himself. She knew that somehow he blamed himself for her parent's situation and seeing that blank look in his face in addition to seeing her parents was too much to handle for one day.

Besides, Ron had been the one to visit with her every week since the beginning. It had all happened the day before the Christmas holidays in her sixth year.

After their last class, they had all ventured outside with Ginny for a snowball fight. It seemed for a moment that they were just ordinary students, enjoying ordinary lives, in a time of peace and not of war. Hagrid had come outside to join them, along with his new assistant, Meg Castellwild, a recent Hogwarts graduate who was exceptionally good with animals.

Hermione had returned to the castle just before dinner flushed, wet, tired, and strangely happy. Twice, Ron had crept up behind her and, instead of shoving a snowball in her face, had surprised her with quick kisses while Ginny and Harry weren't looking. That had been enough to make her warm and content for the rest of the evening, although she had wished that they had more time for that sort of thing. Mrs. Weasley and Professor McGonagall were waiting for them in the otherwise empty common room. Mrs. Weasley's eyes were rimmed with red, and Professor McGonagall's throat seemed to catch as she said quietly, *"Miss Granger, might we have a word with you in my office?"*

Hermione remembered freezing. She remembered everything about that day with unusual clarity. She had just stood there, and felt some relief as Ron instantly reached out and grabbed her hand. She had looked from Professor McGonagall to Mrs. Weasley, with a terrible, terrible sinking feeling in her stomach, and it had been Ron who spoke first.

"Whatever you have to tell her, you can tell all of us—here."

Professor McGonagall had nodded, and had begun to speak again, slowly and distinctly.

"Miss Granger—I'm sorry to inform you—I have to tell you that—" Professor McGonagall had seemed to be searching for the right words and not finding them, *"your parents—"*

Hermione had breathed a barely audible wail of grief, and her legs grew weak. Ron caught her before she fell and immediately helped her onto one of the sofas.

"Not—dead?" she had asked finally, looking her teacher in the eyes, grateful for Ron's hands on her shoulders. Mrs. Weasley came over and sat down next to her, placing a hand on her arm.

Professor McGonagall had shaken her head, her gaze not leaving Hermione's. Hermione had known that the professor had delivered news like this to many other students, but had noted that her voice was uncharacteristically unsteady as she spoke about the Grangers.

"They are alive, but barely. They've been taken to a Muggle hospital. They were—tortured. Death Eaters. They performed the Cruciatus Curse on them repeatedly, from what we can gather."

Hermione had been about to ask, "Why? Why them?" when she heard Ron's voice, strained and dangerously low, ask it for her.

"Why?" he had demanded. *"Why would they target Hermione's parents?"* She felt his hands tense on her shoulders as he spoke.

Mrs. Weasley had looked at her son and answered resignedly, "Ron," she began, *"they're crazy, aren't they? Who knows why they do anything? The Grangers aren't the first Muggle family that they've gone after, and they probably won't be the last..."*

"But they—they killed the others," Hermione had said, her voice sounding feeble, *"at least most of the time. They used Avada Kedavra and those people died instantly. Why*

would they want to torture my parents? Why not come after me? My parents never did anything to anyone." Tears had started to fall from her eyes and down her cheeks. *"They're dentists."* The last statement had sounded almost silly and she had almost wanted to laugh as she said it. Death Eaters versus Dentists. It sounded like the title to a bad novel.

"I should have gone home early," she had muttered to herself more than to anyone else. *"I could have been there. I would have known what was going on. I would have had my wand at least."*

"You would have been no match for seven Death Eaters, my dear, and you would have been tortured as well."

Hermione had shot up out of the chair, feeling suddenly very angry.

"They were tortured because of me!" she had shouted. *"Because of what I am! That's the only reason!"* She hadn't known who she was shouting at—certainly not Professor McGonagall, or Mrs. Weasley, or Harry, Ron, or Ginny.

It had been Harry who had come up to her and pulled her into an embrace. Harry—who rarely showed any emotion anymore. Harry was the one who understood what it was like to feel responsible for someone else's pain and suffering and, finally, Hermione had understood for a brief moment, what it must really be like to be Harry Potter.

She had started to cry in earnest at that point. Ron had soon joined in the embrace, as had Ginny, and she clung to all of them, crying until the tears wouldn't come anymore. Professor McGonagall sat down on one of the armchairs and waited for her to finish. Hermione straightened, and addressed Professor McGonagall in a strained, but even voice, *"Are they going to die? Can I see them?"*

Professor McGonagall and Mrs. Weasley had exchanged worried glances. Mrs. Weasley said gently, *"They will live, and you can see them as soon as you'd like. That's why I'm here—to take you if you want. But—oh, Hermione, dear, I'm not sure—that is, I don't think that they'll be very responsive."*

Hermione nodded slowly, comprehension dawning on her and Professor McGonagall continued. *"You are familiar with the situation of the Longbottoms?"*

Head snapping upwards, Hermione felt a flood of sorrow wash over her body. Hermione had known about the Longbottoms—their son Neville had revealed the story to them earlier in the year. The Longbottoms had been tortured by Death Eaters fourteen years earlier—and they were still in St. Mungo's, still unresponsive, and still unable to recognize their own son.

"Your parents appear to be in a similar condition. They are alive and physically, appear to be well. Their minds, however..."

"Take me to them," Hermione had said. With that, she'd departed with Mrs. Weasley, Ron, Harry, and Ginny at her side.

The sound of a cat squealing and a rustle of feathers jolted Hermione back into the reality of the Burrow. Looking up, she saw Ron's small owl, Pigwidgeon, fluttering above the kitchen table. Crookshanks, her cat, who had joined them for their overnight visit, had his back arched and was growling noisily at the bird, who twittered and hooted as if he were the happiest creature on the planet. Ron groaned, reached out a long arm, and caught the tiny owl firmly in his grasp. Pigwidgeon cooed.

"He's right to growl at you, you silly owl," Ron scolded, not hiding his fondness for his pet very well. "You're very annoying." Turning to Hermione, he said, "I'm going to put Pig in his cage. When I get back downstairs, we can go, all right?"

She nodded, pulling Crookshanks onto her lap and stroking his orange hair absentmindedly.

* * * * *

Ron sat in a not-very-comfortable chair outside of the Grangers' room in St. Mungo's, trying not to think angry thoughts. It wasn't easy. Every time he came here, he felt anger and frustration, and he knew that Hermione knew it and that it upset her.

He'd come here with her every time since the beginning. During the final semester of their sixth year, they'd come every Sunday. Initially, Harry and Ginny came as well, but it seemed to upset Harry as much as it did Hermione, and, in a private consultation with his sister, Ron had worked out a way to keep Harry from accompanying them. That summer, Hermione had stayed with them at the Burrow, and they'd continued their Sunday visits, and in the evenings, he'd held Hermione as she cried—which she did every time.

"Hello Ron!" said a familiar voice. Ron looked up and saw Barton, one of the orderlies, ambling down the hallway towards him. His light blue and white striped uniform robes were so crisply cleaned and starched that the sleeves stood out at angles, making him resemble some sort of roly-poly human star. Ron was well known to the staff in this ward of St. Mungo's. He rarely went inside the room to visit with the Grangers—Hermione thought it might be confusing for them to see anyone but herself and she usually had some sort of new plan or treatment that she'd looked up to try to experiment with. They both knew that the trained medi-wizards at the hospital had tried just about everything already, and knew from their experience with the Longbottoms that nothing was working, but Hermione felt useless if she didn't at least try, and all Ron could do was to sit back patiently and let her do it.

Ron waved to Barton, "Hi," he said. "Anything new and exciting happening in these parts?"

"Nope," answered Barton cheerfully. "You just missed your friend Longbottom. He was down the hall visiting his parents about an hour ago. Says he's going to be working at Hogwarts—learning how to teach before they open up next year. That's great news, isn't it? He wanted to tell his parents."

Ron nodded, although he knew, as Barton did, that the Longbottoms most likely had no idea that Neville visited them, or, if they did, they had no way of acknowledging it. As he watched Barton amble down the hallway, pushing his trolley of supplies, Ron clenched his fists together. The first time he'd seen Barton had been the evening that they'd all accompanied Hermione to see her parents.

Professor McGonagall and Barton had escorted Hermione into the room, while he, Harry, and Ginny waited outside in the hallway with Mrs. Weasley. It had been then that Ron had turned to his mother and demanded, "*Who was it, Mum?*"

Mrs. Weasley had looked almost frightened as she looked up at her son. In her most soothing voice, she had reached out to put a hand on his arm and said, "*Ron, there was a group of them—they always work together, don't they?*"

But he wasn't having any of it. He could tell from the way that his mother was acting that she was hiding something. Feeling his face grow very red, he had repeated, very firmly, "*Who. Was. It? Tell me now, because I'll just find out from Bill or Dad later.*"

"*We don't know!*" Mrs. Weasley had cried, wringing her hands. "*But we think—your father thinks—that is, there's evidence that Lucius Malfoy was the ringleader.*"

Malfoy. Ron hated that name more than anything else. The Malfoys had caused him and those that he loved nothing but trouble, suffering and annoyance. At the news of Malfoy's involvement, Harry had instinctively pulled out his wand, muttering, "*I'll kill him, I'll kill him,*" over and over again.

As for himself, well, his mother's statement had only confirmed what he had already suspected—that Lucius Malfoy had led the attack and that his son Draco had probably made the suggestion. He had only been surprised that the Death Eaters hadn't waited until the next day, when Hermione would have been at home. He had shivered and then turned to Harry and they had both exchanged significant glances at each other. Ron drew out his wand as well and both of them made as if to head for the nearest fireplace. Mrs. Weasley reached out to grab her son's robes, and Ginny had repeated the action towards Harry. But Ron had been ready to fight and he pulled away. Just as he did so, he heard a small voice behind him.

"*Ron? Where are you going? What's going on? Don't go—*" and he'd turned to see Hermione standing in the doorway being supported by the orderly. He had stopped, and a moment later, taken two long strides towards Hermione and pulled her into a tight embrace. Ginny had quietly led Harry to a nearby seat and somehow coerced him to sit down.

Later, when he'd told Hermione about Malfoy's involvement, she'd been very, very calm. Ron had admired her restraint, but knew that he could never forgive that family. And now Malfoy had dared to show up right across the street from them and tried to ruin their summer. Although he had promised Hermione that he would not take any action against Draco, despite his great desire to send a fist flying right towards his thin, stuck up nose, Ron had a strange, sick feeling that something would happen between himself and Draco before the summer was over.

Agitated, he stood up to stretch his legs and decided to take a stroll down the hall and perhaps look in on Neville's parents.

"Ron? Where are you going?" Hermione was once again asking him from the doorway. He swiveled on his heel and turned to face her. She looked, as usual during such visits, worn out.

"I was just stretching my legs. Do you want to go home?"

She shook her head, "I'd like to stay here for a few minutes and just sit before we go back."

Ron nodded, and then, an idea, silly perhaps, but worth a try, entered his head.

"Hermione—do you think—would you mind if *I* went in to see them for a few minutes?" he asked tentatively. He had never visited the Granger's room by himself and only rarely did he enter with Hermione, usually because she had devised some sort of charm or spell that required two people to execute. She looked at him curiously for a moment, and then fell into a nearby chair and gave him a small smile. "If you like."

"Right," answered Ron, leaning forward to give her a kiss on the forehead, and then, bracing himself, turned and entered the Granger's suite.

The room was disconcertingly quiet and clean. Mr. and Mrs. Granger lay side by side in a large four-poster bed, their arms neatly resting on top of the crisp bedding. Both looked as though they had experienced the biggest shock of their lives. Their faces were passive and unreadable, as though asleep, but their eyes were wide open and fearful. This was the only indication in two years that they were awake. They did, apparently sleep, and when the room grew dark, their eyes would close.

Hermione had filled the room with items of significance from their home. Fresh flowers stood on the night tables on either side of the bed and a neat tube of toothpaste and a toothbrush in a cup were sitting next to them. Hermione had been almost irrationally worried that her parent's teeth might fall into decay while in St. Mungo's. Ron had helped her cast a Bacteria-repelling Charm on their mouths early on, but she wanted them to be comforted by the toothbrushes when they were awake. Muggle photos of the Grangers were sprinkled throughout the room, and even to the canopy of the bed, so that they were right in the Grangers' line of vision. Ron paused to admire a picture of Hermione, aged five, with two bushy pigtails sticking out unevenly on either side of her head and a box of Scrabble clutched in her hand and reflected that, in some ways, she hadn't changed much since childhood.

Finally, he pulled up a chair next to Mr. Granger and sat there a moment, not sure why he had wanted to come in here. Finally, he cleared his throat and began, "Hullo Mr. Granger—Mrs. Granger—" Ron leaned forward across Mr. Granger and waved a hand in front of Mrs. Granger's face. "I expect you've just had a nice visit with Hermione, have you?"

No response. Ron felt disappointed, but then again, what had he expected? This was one of the reasons that it took Hermione days to recover from her visits. There was a heavy sense of defeat that overtook a person upon entering this room. Taking a deep breath, Ron continued, "I expect you both know that she's very concerned about you, but you needn't worry. She's smart—the smartest person that I know, and she's trying to work out a way to wake you up. She'll do it too, I know she will. She just hasn't found the right book yet, ha ha." Ron laughed at his own ridiculous joke and nudged Mr. Granger in the ribs with his elbow.

Ignoring the silence, Ron stumbled on. "And I just want you to know that I'm, er, I'm there for her and she's got loads of people who care about her and are looking out for her—not that she needs it, because she's strong, but still—we all love her—I love her especially, and well, I just thought you should know that...." Ron's voice trailed off and he looked exasperatedly at his companions, who were showing no signs of response whatsoever.

"Bugger," he muttered to himself and stood up heavily. Before he opened the door to join Hermione in the hallway, he said to himself, "*I will* get Malfoy." Immediately, he felt ashamed. He had *promised* Hermione that he would stay away from Malfoy and he knew the promise was important to her. Wiping away all signs of anger from his face, therefore, he stepped out into the hallway to collect Hermione and to take her home.

She looked up at him expectantly.

"We had a nice conversation," he said softly. "Rather one-sided, you know, but..."

Hermione stood up and cut him off with a brief kiss. "Thank you," she said.

"Do you want to go home?" he asked, trying to calm his mind enough to Apparate.

"Yes. Let's go to the Burrow and collect Crookshanks and Pig. Then we can go home. Maybe Harry will be back from Quidditch tryouts. I'd love to hear how they're going."

"Quidditch? You? Really?" Ron didn't try to hide the astonishment in his voice.

Hermione shrugged her shoulders. "I'd rather talk about anything other than my parents right now."

"Quidditch it is, then," said Ron, giving her another kiss. "Harry'll die of shock. And then you're coming to the Snout's Fair to keep *me* company. All right?"

Hermione smiled a little, and nodded. "All right."

And with that, they left the hospital.

Harry's heart was lighter than it had been in months—*years, even*, he reflected, as a Bludger whizzed dangerously close to his ear. He dove quickly out of reach, pivoted the Firebolt to his left, and shot off toward the edge of the field, grinning. There was nothing in the world like a good Quidditch scrimmage—except maybe telling his friends every detail of it, afterwards.

Harry felt his stomach drop slightly and it had nothing to do with the dive he'd just taken through the air. The thought of going home from practice tonight gave him a very pleasant case of nerves. Ever since his birthday, Ginny had happened to be at home quite often after the tryouts, and she still wasn't tired of listening to him go on about Quidditch drills. She'd also been up rather early for breakfast a few times this week—she wasn't much of a talker at six in the morning, but Harry didn't mind. This morning, she'd fallen asleep at the table and knocked over her cup of coffee, and Harry smiled to himself now, at the memory of her freckled face, squashed against the place-mat. He had got rid of the spill and woken her; she'd mumbled vaguely at him to catch the Snitch and then gone back to sleep right where she was.

He couldn't deny it anymore. Something about the way she did things was really making him—"Potter, you're out of bounds!" hissed someone directly behind him.

Harry felt a lurch of panic. He had to get his head in the game. He flew forward slightly and checked over his shoulder to see who had given him the warning, realizing as he did so that he hadn't been out of bounds at all. Maureen Knight hovered at his tail, an enormous grin on her face.

"Got you," she chortled, and sped off, her eyes scanning the grass for a flicker of silver and gold. Harry watched dumbly for a moment, then laughed, shook his head, and concentrated hard on the field. The two of them were neck and neck now for the position of Seeker for the Chudley Cannons. Knight was giving him a run for his money, no question—but he could damn well give her one right back. She seemed to share his sixth sense where the Snitch was concerned, and Harry had learned early not to wait until it was spotted to race with her. The thing to do, really, was distract her until he'd slowed down her reaction time.

He flew toward his team's end of the pitch very slowly, veering sharply twice to avoid obstructing his own Chasers and flying rapidly infield once to confuse an opposing Chaser before the man could make a decent shot on the goal hoops. As the action headed down to the other end, Harry rose upward and hovered. He searched the grass, the players' broomtails, the sleeves of their practice robes, the bases of the goal hoops—all places where a Golden Snitch was apt to hide in an attempt to camouflage itself. Snitches were so tricky that it was hard to believe they didn't have brains; Harry knew that the little golden orbs were controlled by very specific, tamper-proof Sporting Spells, yet he had never quite been able to get rid of the suspicion that every Snitch had a mind of its own.

But wherever the Snitch was hiding at the moment, it had no intention of showing itself. Harry shrugged. That didn't necessarily matter. He peered across at Knight, who had one eye on the field and one on him, and knew that she was too clever to follow him if he fainted right now. It would take a bit more strategy than that. Luckily, Ron had given him an excellent tactical idea at the pub last night, using two shot glasses and a dancing peanut as his props. Harry had promised to try it out as soon as possible, and now seemed the perfect time to test if it worked.

He flew up behind one of his team's Beaters, Marty Gudgeon, who had been a Seeker all his life until Oliver had taken a look at him on the first day of tryouts. Harry had to agree with Oliver's assessment, too—Marty had massive arms, was a naturally gifted Beater, and seemed to be having the time of his life in his new position. He was following close behind Chaser Firoza Newland at present, batting the Bludgers away from her with incredible ease, not missing a single one.

"Marty," Harry said, in as low a voice as could still be heard over the wind, "Do me a favor—every time you get a chance, aim those things at Knight."

"Why, hasn't the Snitch come out yet?" Marty grunted, smacking another Bludger off into the sky.

Harry ducked the follow through of Marty's swing. "No, but she's not easily distracted and I want to make sure I have a head start. Help me keep her busy."

Marty glanced at Knight and nodded, and Harry swerved away toward Knight's end of the field. Keeping his distance by about ten meters, he came to a hover parallel with hers.

"Going to sit there watching, and let me do the work?" Knight bantered, not taking her eyes off the field.

"That's right," Harry answered evenly, glancing quickly at Marty. A Bludger was headed toward Firoza, and Harry knew that in a moment, it would be aimed toward Knight, who, Harry was happy to observe, was deeply concentrated on the other end of the field. Harry pulled back another meter, flexed his gloved hands, and gripped the Firebolt once more, tilting its nose down just a fraction in preparation.

He heard a *crack!* from the center of the pitch. A moment later, a Bludger hurtled past, just

inches from Knight's ear, catching her off-guard and sending her spiraling. Harry waited for her to recover, every muscle at the ready, and just as it seemed she'd begun to regain her balance, he dove.

He cut steeply through space, the wind sleeking his hair and stinging his eyes, even behind his glasses. He feinted as though the World Cup depended on it, aiming for a perfectly innocent spot on the ground. He knew that if Knight had been undistracted, she never would have followed him, but as it was, he knew she wouldn't dare take a chance. For all she knew, the Snitch had appeared while she'd been busy with the Bludger, and sure enough, Harry heard the familiar noise of a Nimbus Two Thousand and One close behind him. He knew the sound of that broom by heart; years of playing against a Slytherin team full of them had trained his ear. As mercilessly as if it were Malfoy flying behind him now, Harry came within an inch of the pitch and pulled sharply upward on the Firebolt's handle, sparing himself a painful collision with the dirt.

Not a second later he heard a frantic, "Damn it!" from Knight as she struggled not to hit the ground herself. Harry climbed into the air, satisfied that she'd been thrown off her game, and nodded at Marty, who grinned. "Another one," Harry mouthed, jerking his head in Knight's direction. Marty nodded and turned back to guarding Firoza. Harry glanced downward to see his opponent shooting away from him in the air toward the other edge of the field, her face determined.

Harry followed. When he'd come within twenty feet of her, she dove out of his way. He followed again, and Knight made a sound of frustration—this was precisely what Ron had predicted. She was too paranoid of him now to concentrate entirely on finding the Snitch.

"Sorry," Harry called out cheerfully. "Thought I saw it for a second there. Guess not."

"Oh, shut your pie hole, Potter," Knight retorted, zooming away from him as fast as she could and heading for her team's goal hoops. Harry trailed behind her, feeling a surge of excitement as he watched Marty's bat come into contact with another Bludger, which sailed straight toward Knight's broom. She swore, pivoted, and dropped out of the way, at which moment, Harry feinted for the second time.

He dove at high speed, with real purpose—his feinting had improved unbelievably in the past two weeks. This time, however, he heard no telltale Nimbus noise behind him, and so, before he could go too far and lose the advantage of spotting the Snitch himself, he pulled out of the dive and circled back up into the sky.

"Nice try," Knight hollered, smirking. "I'm not a total idiot, you know."

"I never said you were a *total* idiot," Harry yelled back, and laughed when she responded with a very rude hand gesture.

"KNIGHT!" The voice was Oliver Wood's. Both Seekers' heads whipped downward, and Harry saw Oliver standing below them with his whistle in his hand and a furious look on his face. "WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE PLAYING AT?"

Harry cringed and glanced at Knight, who had gone pale. She didn't answer. Down the field, Firoza had just scored, and Harry was glad for his fellow Seeker's sake that the rest of the players weren't listening to Oliver just now, as he began to rail. "IT IS EVERY PLAYER'S RESPONSIBILITY TO TREAT THIS GAME AS A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH!" he shouted, going red in the face. "ARE YOU A PROFESSIONAL OR NOT?"

Knight opened her mouth as if to say something sarcastic, then shut it, clenched her jaw angrily, and nodded.

"THEN BEHAVE LIKE ONE!" Oliver shook his head in disgust, turned on his heel, and headed toward the far end of the pitch.

Knight muttered a few choice words under her breath as she sailed off in the opposite direction, but Harry also heard a noise from her that sounded suspiciously like a snuffle. He sighed. Knight was great fun to compete with and it was never comfortable to hear a teammate get shouted at like that. It was with a strong feeling of guilt, therefore, that he suddenly dove.

He had spotted the Snitch.

It was the barest glint of light next to Oliver's head, but Oliver didn't even seem to hear its silver wings fluttering in his ear. He stood there, arms crossed, eyes narrowed, staring up into the sky, apparently unaware that Harry was tearing towards him at breakneck speed. Harry concentrated his vision entirely on the tiny gold ball, but it wasn't until he heard Knight's broom streaking close behind him that he felt the competitive thrill that made Quidditch so enjoyable. He was half-tempted to slow down and let her catch it, but Oliver's long ago words about gentlemanly behavior on the field had never left him. And getting to play Seeker on the Chudley Cannons was far too important to him to sabotage his chance in any way.

He swooped so close to Oliver that his captain was sent sprawling to the ground in surprise. Harry stretched out his fingers, and had barely touched one shining wing when the Snitch fluttered

rapidly upward, behind his head. He whirled to follow it, lunged up to catch it, and closed his fist around it just as Knight caught up with him.

"Oh, bloody—"

"Oof!"

He had forgotten that she was right behind him. The Firebolt and the Nimbus Two Thousand and One collided in midair with a crash and Harry was thrown from his broom. He dropped into the muddy grass with a painful thud, and, seconds later, heard a thump right beside him.

"Are you alive?" Knight croaked.

"No," Harry answered, squinting up into the weak sun and feeling no desire whatsoever to get to his feet and find out that he'd broken some bone or another. "You?"

"I doubt it."

A face came into view above them, blocking the sun. When Harry's eyes had adjusted he saw Oliver, his hair askew and his robes covered with mud on one side, looking down at him approvingly. Harry released the Snitch and saw it flicker its wings near Oliver's nose for a brief moment, before it disappeared again.

"That's the kind of dedication I'm talking about," Oliver said gruffly.

Harry was glad for the notice, but felt it wasn't quite fair that he should get the nod entirely to himself, when Knight had taken an equal fall. However, he wasn't quite sure what to say.

"Well, we both—" he began, but Oliver cut him off with a wave of his hand.

"Seekers dismissed." He stalked off, and Harry pushed himself onto his elbows, looking around dazedly. His eyes fell on Knight, who was watching Oliver walk away with an unreadable look on her face.

"Hey," Harry said after a moment, "I'm sorry he... you know. But I played with him in school and it doesn't really mean anything. He's just—"

"Yeah." Knight sighed and got to her feet, wincing with pain. "He's just a—" she stopped short, seeming to think better of her comment. "Well," she concluded, "at least you knocked him over." She grinned. "Hey, didn't you say you have a friend that runs a pub or something?"

Harry got to his feet gingerly, feeling for broken bones. He was relieved not to find any.

"Ron Weasley. He works at the Snout's Fair. Why?"

Knight's eyes widened slightly when Harry said Ron's full name, and he was pleased to realize that his friends must be publicly recognizable now, too.

"Just thinking I could use a drink, that's all," Knight replied, bending down to rub her kneecaps, then shaking out her legs one at a time. "Or maybe five. Does he work tonight?"

"Yeah," Harry answered, remembering for the first time all day that Ron had mentioned he'd be going to the pub tonight, after visiting Hermione's parents at St. Mungo's. He felt slightly guilty for not having thought about Hermione earlier, and realized it would probably be a good idea to meet up with his friends at the Snout's Fair before heading home. "Stagsden's not far," he told Knight. "We can stop by the pub for a few minutes."

"Just a few minutes?" Knight stopped pulling off her Quidditch gloves and raised an eyebrow at him. "Who are you in a hurry to get home to?"

Harry's face burnt so hot that he thought he might disintegrate. "I—well," he mumbled. "You know. I just want to get home and take a shower." For some reason, those words made him blush even harder.

Knight was grinning. "Yeah. *I* know," she said wickedly. "Look, let me grab my bag and then you can give me the address of the pub, okay? You don't have to sit there with me if you've got places to be."

"I don't..." Harry started, but didn't finish. The truth was, he really *did* want to get back to Lupin Lodge.

"Thought so," Knight said, smiling as though she'd read his thoughts. "Be right back."

Harry picked the Firebolt out of the muck and trudged over to the bench where he'd left his own things, wondering if maybe Ginny would be at the pub, as well. He unclasped his muddied Quidditch robes and shoved them in his knapsack, then tried to shake some of the mud out of his hair. After getting a considerable amount of it on Firoza, who looked like she wasn't too happy about the situation, he apologized and stopped trying.

"Ready?" Knight came jogging up with her bag slung over her shoulder. "I'm dying for a butter-beer, and I wouldn't say no to a shot of Liquid Curse, either, after the day I've just had."

"Athletes don't drink."

Harry felt his stomach clench. He turned to see Oliver standing off to Knight's left, carrying his own knapsack and wand. He was glowering at both of them.

Knight stiffened. "I think I'm off the clock," she said evenly, meeting Oliver's glare. "Personal life and all that."

Harry sucked in a low breath. He wasn't sure Oliver knew what it meant to have a personal life apart from Quidditch, and he didn't think that Knight was earning herself any points by saying that *she* did.

"Er—we were just going to say hello to Ron Weasley, Oliver," he attempted. "It's not a holiday, or anything, it's just that Ron works there. You should come. Last night, George stopped by—he told me to say hello to you, by the way."

Oliver shifted his glare to Harry. "Tell him hello, from me," he said shortly. "And you'll both be here at five-thirty tomorrow." He Disapparated before either of them could protest.

"Ruddy *man*," Knight seethed, the moment Oliver was gone from sight. "I love Quidditch. Can't he see I love it? I'm out there, breaking my stupid neck, and *damn* this!"

Harry looked around worriedly. A couple of the other players were starting to listen. "Look, let's just go," he muttered.

"I've been playing since I was a first year," Knight continued, pacing back and forth as if she hadn't heard Harry at all. "A *first* year! Do you know how rare that was, at my school?"

Harry thought he probably did.

"And I've played bloody, bollocking professional Quidditch for *two years*," she continued. "Granted, I was reserve for the Bats and I never got to play, but *still*!"

"Right," said Harry quickly. "But can we—can we go, or something?"

Knight was standing right next to him, still muttering, but she managed to stop for a moment. "We can go, all right," she said testily. "Give me that address, would you?"

"Sure," Harry said, "but you really shouldn't Disapparate while you're so worked up. You could get splinched." Harry grimaced at his own words. He sounded like Professor McGonagall. It was frightening, the way Hermione had rubbed off on him over the years.

Knight sighed. "I know," she muttered, and pulled her wand. "I'm fine. Just... never mind. I'm fine." She took a deep breath. "May I please have the address?" she asked, in a tone of forced calm.

Harry smiled slightly. "Yeah." He opened his knapsack. "I don't know it by heart, I just know how to get there. Hold on, I have a map." He rifled through his bag, digging underneath his robes to find the old, faded parchment map of Britain that Remus had given him to use for Apparition purposes, until he was more comfortable with exact locations.

He had just got his fingers to it when he heard a high-pitched shriek from halfway down the field—and then another. One by one, it seemed that every player on the pitch was beginning to scream.

Harry froze without withdrawing the map. A sick sort of horror rose up in him. There was now a flood of screams, all of them mingling together in fright. It was an old sound, a familiar sound, a sound he'd heard a hundred times—and Harry knew that when he looked toward it, he'd see the Dark Mark hanging in the sky.

Echoes of the war began to play themselves back to him with vicious intensity, one after another. He heard not only the screams of the present, but ones from the past as well... from the war... from the very beginning... The sound of his mother's frightened pleading, which he hadn't heard in months, seemed as clear to him now as if her death had happened yesterday.

"Bloody hell," Knight whispered, her voice shaking. "I've never seen—Harry, turn—turn around—I don't—"

Harry's body went cold with dread at the obvious fear in her voice, and for one sickening moment he knew he would pass out on the spot. But before that could happen, he summoned his strength and whipped around, steeling his mind for battle with a Death Eater. He dropped his knapsack and Firebolt, pulled his wand, and gasped.

Not ten feet away there stood a Dementor.

Of course, he thought blindly, as the rotting stench of the Dementor threatened to make him ill. *Of course...* The cold in his body—the echoes of his mother—all of it became clear to him at once and before he'd even thought about it Harry heard himself cry, "*Expecto Patronum!*" The silver stag on which he had come to depend shot full-force from the end of Harry's wand, driving the Dementor toward the edge of the pitch.

Clearly taken by surprise by the force of the spell, the Dementor seemed keen to find another place to go—it drifted rapidly off toward the forested area beyond the Quidditch field. But Harry knew he couldn't let it disappear. The Dementors weren't obeying anybody—this one must somehow have slipped past Moody and his over-tired crew. Or perhaps it had never been corralled in the first place. If left unattended, Harry was well aware that it would only roam until it found someone

unprotected to attack, and then it would administer the Kiss.

Knowing no other way to deal with the situation, Harry snatched up his bag, mounted his broom and shot after the Dementor, his wand in hand. He heard shouts behind him; Knight and Marty and the others were calling him back, but there was nothing else for it. He was going to have to drive this thing all the way back to Azkaban. It wouldn't go back of its own accord, that was certain—and it had to go back. That was also certain. Harry only hoped it hadn't met up already with any unsuspecting wizards and left them.... He shuddered. He couldn't bear to think of what had happened to that boy's mother, at the beginning of the summer.

"Expecto Patronum!" The Dementor fled before him. But it wasn't a victory, to Harry. The glow he'd found on the Quidditch field during the past few weeks—that wonderful sense of a return to something friendly and familiar—was wiped out of him. Getting this Dementor to Azkaban was going to take two full days, at least. He was going to have to drive it up the bloody coast through unpopulated areas, cast Memory Charms if anybody saw him, use up his energy on Patronus Charms and take no sleep...

It was just like the war.

"Expecto Patronum!" He drove the Dementor further into the wooded area, due north, and thought grimly to himself that it was a damned good thing he'd brought the map with him. He was going to need it for the next two days.

Confrontations and Confidences

After spending two days in the company of the Dementor, Harry's brain was very nearly numb. Though at first he had been able to summon up the positive energy necessary to create his Patronus, over the last several hours it had taken an incredible effort to produce each one. He had exhausted his joyful thoughts and felt nothing but his own physical and mental fatigue, so much so that he couldn't even register the relief of arriving at his destination. Here, finally, was the departure point of the Azkaban prison rafts. Where a Muggle would have seen a rotting dock and rusted gates, Harry saw a hut-like guard's station and the silhouettes of two wizards conferring at the water's edge. They were pointing to something that seemed to be in flight, far off across the water.

Harry drew a deep breath and gathered the last reserves of his happiness. He concentrated on the moment last Christmas when he and Hermione had found Ron, still alive. He was almost there.

"Expecto Patronum!"

The men at the water's edge looked up sharply, and, through a haze of exhaustion, Harry saw Mad-Eye Moody raise his wand. In moments, Moody had taken the Dementor off of Harry's hands—Harry watched, barely able to stay on his broom, as Moody drove the creature squarely into the center of a prison raft.

"Keep him out there for me, lad," he barked to the young, redheaded wizard beside him. Dimly, Harry recognized Charlie Weasley, who raised his wand at once and waded into the Atlantic to hold the Dementor at bay.

Now it was done. Relieved of his burden, Harry landed at once, though the instant he let down his guard, he felt the full effects of the Dementor wash over him. He stood on shaking legs, barely able to keep hold of the Firebolt. Moody made straight for him.

"What happened?"

Harry merely shook his head, not feeling capable of coherent speech.

"Come on," Moody prodded gruffly after a moment. "Got to know, Harry. Find the Dementor wandering, did you?"

Harry nodded, and made himself summarize. "It came onto the... Cannons Quidditch pitch. At the tryouts. Two days ago."

Moody surveyed Harry carefully. "Took it on yourself to bring it up here?" Harry didn't answer. After a moment, Moody nodded. "No choice, was there? Others weren't keen on taking an ugly responsibility." He gave a sigh of disgust and clapped Harry on the shoulder. "You did the only thing. Now get in that guard station and lie down."

"I have to get back to...Stagsden."

"On what steam, boy? Can't Apparate long distances in your condition." Moody gave a growling chuckle and turned Harry around by his shoulder. "Hell, you look like you'd be splinched just going across the street."

Numbly, Harry allowed the old Auror to steer him into the guard station, where he very gratefully sank onto a cot and leaned forward on his knees, shivering. Moody provided him with water and a huge slab of chocolate—"Get your strength up"—and, after extracting a promise from Harry that he wouldn't try Disapparating until he'd had a real rest, Moody went back to the business of returning the escaped Dementor to Azkaban.

Left alone, Harry exhaled and tried to straighten up. Automatically he reached for the chocolate. He didn't want it, but his body demanded it—he felt as though he had been soaked in a tank of ice water. Two days alone with a Dementor had chilled him to his bones and chocolate was the only way to get warm again. He bit into it, feeling sick to his stomach at the mouthful of sweetness, though he also took some measure of relief from the immediate heat that was restored to his blood. His veins seemed to thaw and his heart to start beating. Feeling as if he were made entirely of

rubber, Harry collapsed down on his side. His eyes blurred and fell shut.

But what the chocolate had done for his body, nothing could do for his mind. The instant his eyes closed, he began to see images—pictures—on the insides of his eyelids. He choked and dug his face into the pillow, trying to blot them out. It didn't work at all—Harry's thoughts were as dark and nightmarish as his memories could make them—the Dementor's presence had plunged him into a world where it was beyond painful to exist, and the pictures reeled ceaselessly through his brain. His mother's frantic pleas... Cedric Diggory's final request... Dumbledore, asking to die.... Hermione's sobs, when she had received word of the attack on her parents... his own fear-maddened state when he had received the news of Ron's abduction... then came the sickening flash of green light that had taken Hagrid's life, followed by the hellish news of Percy Weasley's murder—and Ginny, stepping between his own body and Lucius Malfoy's curse, screaming for her father...

His brain recoiled from so much guilt and horror. Harry moaned and rolled up against the cold wall, as if it offered some escape. He pressed his forehead against it, wanting only to shut out the images, shut out the thoughts.

Almost at once, the strength of his exhaustion overtook the tumult in his mind. Fatigue dragged him headlong into a welcome blackness. Mercifully, as the sound of ocean waves crashing beyond the door drowned out the screaming in his head, Harry went unconscious.

* * * * *

He woke in darkness, but someone had a light—beside him, in the chair, someone was reading a letter by the beam of a wand. Harry couldn't see who it was. He sat up at once, disoriented, feeling urgently for his glasses.

"Here."

Harry felt the glasses being stuck into his hand. Hurriedly he fixed them to his nose, and the first clear sight that met him was Charlie Weasley, a massive, crooked grin stretched across his freckled face as he lighted the lamps in the guard station.

Somehow, the sight cheered Harry.

"Hey, Charlie," he croaked. "Wh'time is it?"

"Nine. You've slept about twelve hours. Reckon you deserved it, doing what you did." Charlie's face went a bit more serious. "You okay?"

Harry shrugged, and changed the subject. "I thought you lived in London now, with Bill."

"I do. But there's sort of a test being done. We're seeing what we can do with dragons, against the Dementors."

"Dragons?" Harry repeated, swinging his legs off the cot and shaking the fog from his head. He needed to get back to Stagsden. Nobody knew where he was.

"Yeah," Charlie answered earnestly, "I think they might be very effective—well, it was really my assistant's idea, but I agree. They've got a lot of natural energy, dragons. It could be the sort of thing that makes this twenty-four hour Patronus business obsolete."

Harry nodded, not really listening. "Hey, Charlie—did anybody tell Sirius or anyone that I was here?"

Charlie shook his head. "Couldn't get to anyone from here. Moody's out dealing with everything on the island and Sirius hasn't been up here since the move to Culparrat—he's either in Wales or London, I expect. There's no fireplace in this hut for contact, and I was told not to Disapparate and leave you by yourself under any circumstances."

Harry tried to hide his irritation. He wished that Charlie had woken him and sent him home earlier. The last thing he wanted to deal with now was a house full of worry.

Charlie seemed to read his mind. "I'd've woken you, Harry. But Mum drilled into all our heads last summer that we're not to disturb you if you're sleeping." He grinned again. "She says you're too restless and you need quiet."

Harry felt himself flush. "Glad everyone knows my personal sleeping habits," he muttered, quite embarrassed to hear this description of himself from one of the older Weasley boys.

But Charlie was unaffected. He clipped Harry on the arm. "Come off it, you know Mum treats you just like us. We none of us have any secrets."

Harry flushed again, embarrassed this time by the implied affection in Charlie's remark. Though being considered one of them wasn't unpleasant, being teased as if by an older brother was still unfamiliar territory for Harry. He ducked his head and pointed to Charlie's letter, changing the subject for the second time. "Who's that from?"

It was Charlie's turn to turn a bit pink. "Oh, it's not from anyone," he returned too casually,

shoving the parchment into one of the myriad pockets of his broad dragon keeper's vest. "You know. Stuff for work. You'd-er- better get back to Stagsden before they go crazy trying to figure out where you are."

Harry watched Charlie fidget, and was tempted to remind him that none of them had any secrets. But he didn't feel quite up to a laugh, and Charlie was right. It was high time he was home.

He thanked Charlie briefly for sitting with him, asked him to say goodbye to Moody, then grabbed up his Firebolt and Disapparated. He hoped both that he wasn't too tired to pull off the long trip without hurting himself, and that no one at Lupin Lodge had got too upset, in his absence.

His first hope was realized the moment he opened his eyes and found himself standing safely in the middle of the cozy, firelit front room of Remus's house.

His second hope was dashed a moment later.

"Harry-oh, my goodness--"

It was Hermione's cry, and she leapt from her chair by the fire to run across the room and flutter anxiously in front of him.

"Oh, Harry, what happened? At first, when you didn't come home, we thought something with Malfoy-Ron nearly went over there-and then Sirius went to find Oliver but we still didn't know where you were, because Oliver didn't-and then a woman went to the pub to find Ron and tell him about the Dementor, and Goldie directed her to our house and she came and told us what you did and oh-don't ever do that!" Hermione threw her arms around him and squeezed.

Harry endured it for a moment, then ducked out of her grasp. "I'm okay," he said flatly. It wasn't a lie. He was, technically, unhurt.

"Harry! What happened to you? One of the players came over and said you'd chased a Dementor into the woods-" Ron was at his side in a flash, Hermione's cry having summoned him more effectively than magic. He peered at Harry with equal anxiety. "What went on? You okay? Sit down or something. Want anything?"

Harry let himself be hustled into a chair by the two of them, and tried not to get irritated. He knew that they still weren't over the war. When people had disappeared for two days during the war, the likelihood had been that they wouldn't be found alive.

"I'm okay," he repeated, "I'm okay. I just want to go to bed--"

He stopped in mid-sentence. Sirius was standing in front of him, and Harry had never seen his godfather's face so furious, not even when he had first confronted Wormtail in the Shrieking Shack, after his escape from Azkaban.

"What the *hell* were you thinking." It was a demand.

Harry found himself at a loss. He *hadn't* been thinking. There hadn't been time for thinking; there had been nothing in his head except stopping the Dementor. Sirius should have known that; Sirius had been in the war. "I was at the Cannons tryout and a Dementor wandered onto the field, so somebody had to make sure it got driven back up to Azkaban and I figured..."

"You figured you wouldn't have anybody alert us. You figured you'd just disappear for two days and let us all wonder."

Harry felt anger rising up in him. Sirius was being unfair. "Look, it's not like I just ran off on some kind of holiday. There was something that needed to be done and--"

"Don't you ever-*ever* -go off like that again without telling someone. What do you think you are on about, Harry?" Sirius shook his head, his pale blue eyes darker than ever. "All that girl could tell me was that you'd gone after a Dementor. Is that true? You spent the last two days alone with a Dementor?"

Harry clenched his jaw. He'd known this wasn't going to go over well. "Had to," he muttered, thinking that after all he'd just done, he was in no damned mood to be yelled at for it. "What did you want me to do? Drive it over here and say hello, first? I just did the first thing I thought of! I went north!"

"There is *always* a way to let us know where you are!"

"Like what?" Harry challenged coldly. "You tell me what *you* would've done! You went up to Azkaban to deal with the Dementors yourself, and you're the last person who should get near them!"

"I am an adult--"

"And what am I?!"

"You're barely eighteen."

Harry gripped the arms of the chair, unable to find words for his anger. Finally, he managed, "If you don't know by now that I'm not a child, then I can't talk to you."

Sirius didn't answer. His demeanor had suddenly shifted away from fury. He continued to look

at Harry, but he wasn't glaring now—his eyes were haunted.

"Hello, Harry." The calm greeting came from behind Sirius, and Harry's head snapped toward it. Remus was in the hallway, looking gravely at him. "It's very good to see you," he said quietly. "I'm glad you're safe. Do you need anything?"

Harry nodded and stood up, ignoring the sounds of worry from Ron and Hermione, on either side of him. "I need to go to bed," he said shortly. He brushed past Sirius and toward the stairs, wanting to get out of the room and escape the anxiety in it. His godfather's eyes clouded as they followed him, but Harry ignored that, too.

"Don't worry about the Quidditch tryouts," Ron called after him. "Oliver knows what's happened, we talked to him already."

Harry spun around in horror, at the mention of tryouts. He'd forgotten, once the Dementor had taken control of his thoughts, that there was such a thing as Quidditch. Disappointment coursed through him. He had missed two days of training, and had probably been removed from the running. Oliver would never let him come back.

But Sirius gestured vaguely toward the stairs, nodding his agreement with Ron. "It's nothing to worry about. Go on up and rest, Harry, I'll contact Oliver. He just wants to know where you are. I'm sure you'll be back on the pitch by tomorrow if that's what you want."

It was on the tip of Harry's tongue to protest. He didn't want Sirius doing anything for him, just now. He *was* an adult, and it was his own responsibility to deal with his problems. Yet he was still so bone-tired that he just couldn't bring himself to argue anymore. And when Sirius repeated that he'd take care of things, a voice buried deep at the back of Harry's mind told him to go ahead and let Sirius do it. This was, after all, the sort of thing his father would be doing for him, if his father were alive. That was the point of a godfather.

Harry felt his eyes water and he turned away quickly, climbing up the stairs before he could start to think about his father, fearing that it might send his mind spiraling back into the sequence of nightmares he'd been living in for two days. He dragged his feet heavily upstairs to the second floor corridor, staving off all thoughts of his parents and of the war.

But he didn't have to fight his thoughts for very long. As he made his way toward his room, Harry's mind turned in a direction he hadn't expected. He stepped away from his own door and walked slowly back to the door of the girls' room, instead. Ginny was the only occupant of the house that hadn't greeted him upon his return. He remembered how much he'd been looking forward to getting home from practice and telling her all about it. He wondered if she'd worried for him, at all, while he'd been gone.

Harry stopped outside her door and hesitated, not sure why his feet had led him here, or what he was about to do. He lifted his hand—perhaps to knock—but before he could choose a course of action, the door opened.

Ginny stood there, staring at him, her dressing gown not even tied. The room behind her was a wreck of open books and what looked like scattered potion ingredients and ruined parchment. Ginny's own appearance was as disheveled as the room; her eyes were swollen, her face was pale, and her bright hair fell down in tangles. A crumpled tissue stuck out of her white-knuckled fist. She looked like she'd caught a very nasty flu, and though Harry knew why she was so upset, he preferred to believe that the flu was the problem.

"Are you sick?" he asked her quickly.

Her eyes did not leave his. "No," she said deliberately, not bothering to hide the tears in her voice.

Harry suddenly felt the weight of his own disappearance. The gravity of it hadn't struck him, when Sirius had given him an angry lecture, but it struck him now. He should have let somebody know where he was going, regardless of the circumstances. He should have found a way.

"I didn't mean to worry anyone," he heard himself say. "I didn't think—"

"People still get terrified that you're not coming back," Ginny interrupted sharply, her voice thick. She stared at him fiercely for another moment, then reached out her hand and touched his shoulder, as if testing to make sure that he really existed. A barely audible cry escaped her when her fingers came into contact with his robes. She dropped her hand, stepped close to him, and silently buried her face in his neck.

Harry stood, stunned. He felt her hands on his waist. Felt her body fit softly against his. She took a deep breath, which pushed against his chest, and then she exhaled shakily on his skin.

"You're here," she managed.

It was as though he'd been electrocuted. Harry felt the hair rise up all over his body at the shock of being touched like this, by her. He shivered violently, then slumped against Ginny, forgetting everything, allowing her to hold him up.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled into her shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"No," she protested, her voice choked and muffled on his neck. "I know you didn't want to go. I know. I know."

Her arms were around him now and she rocked him gently. Harry shut his eyes and let her do it, neither moving to hold her, nor moving to fight. He was dimly surprised that she was able to support his weight.

After a long time, Ginny raised her head. "Come on," she said quietly, pulling away from him, and turning him toward his bedroom door. Without a word, she guided him to his bed, pulled back the blankets, and helped him to sit. Hedwig hooted fretfully from her perch in the corner, as if she, too, had missed him and worried about him.

Harry sat, unmoving and exhausted, listening to bureau-drawers open and shut as thoughts raced through his head. His body was warm, where Ginny had been against him. The Dementor was back at Azkaban. Moody would take care of it. He didn't have to think about it. Ginny had left imprints on his back, where her hands had moved. Maybe Oliver would let him go back to the tryouts, if Sirius explained things. Sirius was getting too damned overprotective. And Ginny...

Ginny. She had just put pajamas at the foot of his bed, and was now leaving the room. Harry turned toward her—he didn't want her to go—but she dimmed the lights and left him alone, shutting the door behind her with a whispered, "Sleep well."

Harry looked at the closed door, feeling strangely lost. Somehow, he fumbled out of his robes and into the pajamas, then made his way under the covers. He drifted quickly toward another long rest, clinging to the remembered sensation of Ginny, breathing against him. The rise and fall of her.

He kept her at the front of his mind, a talisman against all darker thoughts, until sleep rushed over him in a wave and he passed out completely.

* * * * *

"Just a butterbeer for me please," Hermione said to Harry, smiling as she settled herself at one of the worn wooden tables at the Snout's Fair. Harry didn't smile back. He nodded silently and went up to the bar, where Ron was serving the other patrons, and stood there with his hands in his pockets, looking disinterestedly at the wall.

Hermione felt awful, watching him. It had been two days since he had come back from Azkaban, and they still hadn't talked to each other at all; he'd either been at Quidditch practice, or sleeping. She had hoped that, tonight, he might tell her a little bit about what was happening in his head, but now that they were here, she doubted that he'd say anything. It was already shaping up to be the kind of night where she'd be the one doing all the talking. Harry had been extremely withdrawn ever since his return; he was so quiet, and looked so drained, that Hermione didn't know what to do for him. It was like the first day of summer and the end of the war, all over again, and she was actually surprised that Harry had agreed to come to the pub with her at all.

She watched him as he spoke to Ron, and she tried not to look too worried about him when he came back to the table a moment later, two foaming butterbeers in his hands. He clunked them down on the table and slid into the chair across from her, looking idly down at his tankard.

Hermione struggled to find something casual to chat about. "So, Harry, were you surprised by the owls we got this morning?" she asked brightly, hoping that a light topic would steer them in the right direction. Earlier that day, they had all received invitations to the wedding of two of their former Gryffindor classmates: Lavender Brown and Seamus Finnigan. Hermione had found the invitations both beautiful and touching—the wedding was to take place on Hogwarts grounds, on September first, to commemorate the day the couple had met and the spot where they'd fallen in love.

Much to Hermione's surprise, Harry gave her a bit of a smile. "No more surprised than I was to happen upon you and Ron *reading* in the sunroom yesterday." He cleared his throat falsely. "Looked like a good book."

Hermione blushed and threw one of the dancing peanuts at him, but she was so relieved to hear him joking that she couldn't really be upset with him for teasing.

"Well," she said, changing the subject back again deftly, "we'll have to get them wedding gifts, but I haven't the faintest idea what they'd like. Lavender and I shared a room for seven years, and all I can really think about getting her is perfume, or lipstick, or a Love Potion kit. Though she wouldn't need *that* anymore, I suppose."

Harry laughed, a little. "That's a hard one," he agreed. "I'm not that close to Seamus, either. Maybe a frying pan in the shape of a shamrock?"

Hermione giggled. "Right. Or a purple tablecloth with brown trim?"

Harry groaned. "Not funny," he complained. "Where's Ron?"

Hermione pretended to be highly offended by this remark, and immediately challenged Harry to come up with something better. They proceeded to entertain themselves by listing the most outrageous wedding gifts they could think of, and by the time she'd exhausted her ideas, Hermione was laughing so hard that she could barely breathe. Ron joined them at once, on pretense of clearing the table, and demanded to know what was so funny. Harry explained the joke, and asked Ron his opinion on the wedding gifts.

Ron snorted. "Pretty obvious, isn't it?" He patted Hermione on the head in his maddeningly superior way. She shot him a look, but he merely patted her again. "I mean, all things considered, Hermione, you really owe Lavender a bunny rabbit." He grinned, whisked the dancing peanut shells away with his wand, and sauntered back over to the bar.

Hermione furrowed her brow, trying to figure out what on earth he was talking about, when she was startled by a loud noise. Harry had suddenly shouted with laughter and doubled over with a cry of "Good one!"

Ron laughed with him, lifting up a tankard from the bar and shouting, "Cheers!"

Hermione continued to feel puzzled. She looked from Ron to Harry, both curious and annoyed. "Well, what?" she demanded. "I don't get it."

"You—" he explained, through his continued sniggering "—Lavender—Divination— rabbit—dead."

Hermione opened her mouth in amazement. She had entirely forgotten about that incident. "Yes, that's *right*!" she laughed, putting her fingers to her mouth. "Poor Binky—I should have been nicer to Lavender about that, but honestly..." She trailed off and looked at Ron, who was standing behind the bar, laughing uncontrollably. She stuck out her tongue at him. He looked at it, then raised his eyebrows suggestively. She looked away in a hurry, feeling her heart flutter up into her throat.

"You know," she said to Harry, fanning her face with her hand and trying to keep her voice normal, "I can't believe the things Ron remembers."

Harry snorted. "Versus the things he can't remember to save his life?"

"Exactly!" She lifted her tankard.

Harry clinked his against it, exchanging with her the kind of smile earned only by many years of friendship. They sat sipping their butterbeers in silence for a few minutes, and Hermione felt very content. It had been good to bring Harry here. He was still smiling a bit, seemingly entertained by two wizards playing a game of Exploding Snap in the corner.

"So," he said mildly, keeping his eyes trained on the precarious card-deck, "I guess Ginny was busy tonight?" He took a swallow from his tankard.

Hermione's eyes widened at his transparent question, but she willed herself not to act strange, or sound surprised. "I don't know," she replied, as evenly as she could. "I asked her if she wanted to come along, but she said she didn't feel like it. I think she's working on something, actually. She's been digging around in my books all week."

"Oh." Harry shrugged neutrally.

To anyone else he would have seemed disinterested, but years of watching Ron's ears turn pink had trained Hermione's eye. And Harry's cheeks, she was thrilled to note, were unnaturally flushed. She could hardly restrain herself from teasing him, but she knew Harry far too well to try it. She'd never get anything out of him, if she made him uncomfortable. Instead, she gripped her hands together under the table and waited impatiently for him to say something else.

"What's she working on?" he asked, after a moment, still watching the Snap game with incredible attention.

It was all Hermione could do not to giggle, but she bit back the urge. "She won't tell me," she answered honestly. "Apparently it's some sort of secret." She grinned inwardly as she delivered this tantalizing information, watching Harry struggle to maintain his expression of careful unconcern.

"Huh," he answered. He didn't say anything else for awhile, and when he did, it had nothing to do with Ginny. "Oh, that's going to explode, right there," he muttered, pointing to one wizard's hand of cards. "He has to get rid of that one."

Hermione rolled her eyes, sipped her butterbeer, and thought about telling Harry that he was easier to read than a first year textbook. It was rather fun, though, just to watch him squirm. She had endured a few years of raised eyebrows and pointed smirking from him, regarding her relationship with Ron, and if Harry thought he was going to escape without taking a bit of his own medicine, he was dead wrong. She sat back again, waiting, feeling sure he'd ask something else if she stayed quiet.

Sure enough, after a very loud *SNAP!* from the corner, and a groan of disappointment from the wizard who had lost, Harry took another swig of butterbeer and tried again. "Can't believe you let her throw your books around like that," he said casually, "if you don't even know what she's doing

with them.”

Hermione couldn't resist. “Throw my books around?” she asked, feigning puzzlement. “Did she really? Where?”

Harry turned crimson, pressed his mouth shut, and concentrated very hard on his butterbeer.

Hermione permitted herself a wicked grin. She knew very well that Ginny had been throwing her books around in a chaos. She also knew that, if Harry had seen the mess, then he must have been in the girls' room. She wondered just when *that* had happened, and just *what* had happened, and though it was normally the sort of thing she scoffed at Lavender for caring about, she still resolved to find out everything, later on, from Ginny.

She also decided not to torture Harry further.

“I asked her what she's doing with all my things,” she informed him simply. “And she told me. It's just that I don't believe her answer. She says she's ‘gearing up for the school year’.”

Harry looked up at her sharply, abandoning all earlier pretenses. “What school year?” he demanded. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, I don't mean a *regular* school year, of course,” Hermione explained quickly. “But she's going to have to study, isn't she? Whether or not there's a Hogwarts to study in, she still needs to finish her education. I still have all my books and notes, and I told her she could have them if she wanted, so she's really going to be fine in terms of...”

She trailed off. Harry was glaring at her as if she had somehow caused Hogwarts' collapse. “It's not nearly the same and you know it,” he leveled. “It's not fair she doesn't get to finish.”

Hermione put her chin in her hand. “I know that,” she said quietly, feeling suddenly depressed. It was very hard to believe that Hogwarts could close for a year. Hard to believe that her school, which had almost always felt like a fortress, could suffer such serious collapse and destruction. It just didn't seem real. She'd been there, and seen it, and still couldn't quite convince herself of what had happened. It was going to be strange, she reflected, to attend a wedding by the lake, and have to face the crumbling castle again.

Harry had gone back to watching the Snap game, and was clearly finished commenting on both Hogwarts, and Ginny. Hermione continued to sink into her own serious thoughts. She didn't have to worry about missing out on a year of school, but she worried, very much, about her future. About her parents. About her decision to go to Cortona, where the Thinker lived, whether or not she received an invitation. She still hadn't broken that news to Ron. And when she did, he was going to be so unhappy....

Hermione sighed deeply and Harry looked over at her. Recovering herself, she gave him what she hoped was a winning smile and said pleasantly, “By the way, how are Quidditch trials working out? Since you've been back, I mean.”

Harry groaned loudly, “Oliver is a slave driver. I shouldn't even drink this butterbeer—he'll be able to tell, tomorrow.”

“It isn't strong at all! It's not as if it can give you a hangover.”

“Well, according to him, it's all taking precious milliseconds off my speed and agility.” Harry shrugged. “I'm working out harder than anybody, but... I guess I should take it more seriously.”

Hermione shook her head at once. “No. You should enjoy yourself, you know how Oliver is. And anyway, Viktor used to drink butterbeer.”

“Oh, did he?” Harry grinned. “Viktor Krum?”

“Oh, shut up.”

Harry laughed. “Yeah, well. I think I've got a good chance to be Seeker, and I'll find out in another couple weeks. But the witch who's my competition is few years older than I am, and to be honest, she's good.”

Hermione leaned forward happily. When Harry talked about Quidditch, he could ramble on almost like a normal person. “The witch who told us what happened with the Dementor, you mean? Is she the other Seeker?”

“Yeah, Maureen Knight. She's getting worse hell from Oliver than I am, and she gives him back more lip than the twins ever did in school. Anyway, there're only two of us, so we'll both end up on the team. It's just a matter of who's the reserve player.”

“I'm sure you'll be Seeker,” assured Hermione. “And won't Ron be ecstatic, to be best friends with someone on the Chudley Cannons!” She clapped her hands together, excited and pleased for Harry's sake. “Oh, and when you're a star, could you persuade Oliver to change the team colors? I never cared for that particular shade of orange, especially when Ron insists on wearing that hat all the time—it blends with his hair and makes his head look like a big pumpkin.”

Harry laughed at that, and then motioned to Ron to send over two more butterbeers. They landed

on the table a moment later, with a soft thud. Attached was a small note that read: *Two's your limit, Potter!*

Harry made a face. "Honestly. I get drunk once and he thinks he has to stand guard. D'you have a quill?"

Hermione did. She handed it to Harry, who scribbled something hastily on the back of the note and sent it zooming back in Ron's direction. Hermione watched as Ron opened the note, guffawed, and threw it in the waste bin.

"Language, Potter," he shouted. "Ladies present, and all that." He winked at Hermione.

"He's a prat," Harry muttered.

"Yes," said Hermione slowly, sensing a possible opening. "Ron is very-protective of you."

Harry gave her a funny look. "I guess," he answered noncommittally.

Hermione bit her lip. She didn't know how to bring up what she *really* wanted to talk about with Harry-she wasn't even sure if it would somehow violate some sort of code between him and Ron. But she had to run the Thinker idea past someone. She felt guilty for not confiding her plans in Ron, first and foremost, but she didn't want to ruin the summer by making him miserable. And now that she'd really made up her mind, she wanted to tell someone who knew her well, and somehow validate her choice.

Carefully, she began. "It's strange to be finished with school, don't you think?"

"Yeah," Harry replied, a bit gloomily.

Hermione pressed on. "Everyone will be moving on. You'll be playing Quidditch, Ron will be working here, and I'll be..."

Harry looked at her with interest. "Yeah?"

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat and nervously glanced toward the bar, where Ron was practicing mixing drinks in the air. "We-ell," she began, sounding Harry out, "I sort of wanted to ask you..."

Harry waited for her to continue. When she didn't, he leaned forward curiously. "Go on," he prompted.

Hermione scratched the splintering wood of the table with her fingernail. After a moment, she asked slowly, "Has Ron- said anything to you about... about the possibility of my apprenticing a Thinker?"

"Hmph," was all Harry said. He sat back and glanced toward the bar.

"He *has* mentioned it, then?" Hermione pressed. "What did he say?"

Harry gave a short laugh. "Only that he's glad you haven't heard back from that one."

Hermione pursed her lips. "Oh *really*," she snapped. "How generous."

"Yeah," said Harry, looking very uncomfortable. "Look-I thought you knew that much already."

She put up a hand. "I did. Don't worry, you didn't give away any secrets. And I'm sorry, Harry, I don't want to drag you into the middle of this."

"Too late," Harry sighed, and nearly drained his butterbeer with one long gulp. He clapped the tankard onto the table and exhaled. "So, are you going to be a Thinker, or what?"

Hermione wanted to say yes. But another look in Ron's direction made her heart twist guiltily. "Well... just hypothetically... what would *you* think if I went to Cortona?"

"Cortona?"

"Where the Thinker lives. Off of Greece."

Harry shrugged. "Do you think you should go?" he asked. "Will they even let you in? You don't have a letter or anything."

"True- but I think that not hearing back from Cortona is a test of sorts," Hermione replied in a rush, "and I have to try and see what happens, or else I won't forgive myself. I could Think of something to help my parents, if I had the right training. I know I could."

"So you're going."

Hermione shook her head rapidly. "No, no. I'm just saying, *if* I went. And, from the reading I've done, Thinker apprenticeships generally only last for half a year!"

"Which means you could do it in about two weeks."

"Well, I'd try to do it in four months. If Ron understands that I'm coming back at Christmas, then he might be less upset with the idea, don't you think?"

"Sure," said Harry, taking a swig of butterbeer. "You'll have a blazing row, tears will be shed, Ron will punch a tree, but in the end, you'll persuade him. I've seen it before."

Hermione blinked. "Are we really as bad as that?"

"No," said Harry, nodding his head vigorously.

"Oh, Harry." Hermione sighed and looked over at Ron, who was clearly telling some sort of joke. The wizard listening to him was chortling loudly, and slapping his hand on the bar. "It's not as if I'm leaving *him*. You have to help me pound that into his thick head."

Harry laughed. "Gladly." And then, more seriously, he added, "And I think you should go to Cortona."

"You do?" Hermione asked, hopefully.

"Yeah."

Feeling much better about the situation, and much more ready to break the news to Ron, Hermione slowly finished her second butterbeer. She was weighing the idea of staying until the bar closed and telling Ron everything on the walk home, when bells jingled, signalling that the door to the Snout's Fair had opened behind her.

Harry sat up straight and stared over her shoulder at the door, putting his hand to the pocket where he kept his wand. "Damn," he muttered under his breath.

"Who is it?" she started to ask, turning around in her chair.

She never finished speaking. Instead, she found herself looking into the cold, grey eyes of Draco Malfoy, who held her stare without blinking. He wore sweeping Quidditch robes that looked identical to the standard issue practice robes that Harry came home in every day, except that Harry's practice uniform was garish orange, and Draco's attire was dark gray, with white finishes. He stood there haughtily.

Behind him there stood a hulking man with ruddy cheeks and brush-like hair, who would have been athletically handsome if he hadn't looked quite so menacing. He was carrying two brooms, one of them probably Draco's. Hermione was struck by how closely his presence resembled Goyle's, and she felt her stomach sink at the too-familiar sight. This was going to lead to a confrontation, she just knew it—she moved to the edge of her seat and saw Harry do the same.

Malfoy, however, looked entirely relaxed. His eyes flitted over her shoulder toward Harry; then he looked away, and stared in the direction of the bar. "Thirsty?" he said, over his shoulder, to the man behind him.

Hermione cast a worried glance at Ron, who was staring at Malfoy, his bar towel clutched in his hand, his face a mask.

"Go on and get whatever you want," Malfoy instructed his companion, who stepped toward the bar immediately. Malfoy, however, did not go near Ron. Instead, he headed toward Hermione's table, slowly, looking arrogantly amused. She reflected that it was interesting that Malfoy had not approached her when they had been alone, but seemed to have no problem doing so when he had a massive friend alongside him. It was just like school—as if nothing significant had happened, as if no war had been fought. And, though she didn't fear Draco Malfoy, she felt sick that he could be so unchanged.

"Well, well," Malfoy said softly, stopping a few feet from Hermione's chair. She glanced around him at Ron, who filled two tankards without taking his eyes off of Malfoy for a second.

"Hello, Draco," Hermione said wearily. She wasn't going to rise to it. The time for acting like children had passed.

Malfoy shot her a look that very clearly said he wanted nothing to do with her kind, then directed his stare toward Harry. "Does Weasley realize that you're cozying up to his girlfriend Potter?" he asked, still more softly. "Or do the two of you just share everything?"

Hermione blanched, praying that Ron hadn't heard him.

Harry was on his feet. "Out," he said flatly, drawing his wand and holding it at his side. "Get out. You're a disgrace."

Malfoy laughed, and Hermione shivered inwardly. At the same time, she felt a bit like laughing, herself. He obviously hadn't grown up at all.

"It's all right, Harry..." she began, then stopped when she saw that Ron was now on the customer side of the bar.

"Anything to say, Malfoy, you can say it loud enough for all of us," he called.

People around them in the pub began to watch, and whisper. Goldie came around the bar, Hermione noted gratefully, close enough to make a grab for Ron, should something happen.

Malfoy didn't bat an eye. Instead, he smirked and said tauntingly, still keeping his voice very low, "I hear you're trying out for the Cannons, Potter. I suppose you just can't give up the limelight—you'd rather be a shining star on a terrible team than challenge yourself by trying out for one that actually wins occasionally." He smirked, and fingered the double F emblazoned near the clasps of his Quidditch robes. "What's the Chudley motto again?" He turned to his companion, who had rejoined him carrying two tankards. Malfoy took one and raised his voice, almost as if he knew that

insulting the Cannons was almost as good as insulting Hermione. "Oh, that's *right*—let's all keep our *fingers* crossed and hope for the *best*." He smiled coolly, and his friend erupted into rather unpleasant sounding chuckles.

Anger and frustration coursed through Hermione as she sat there watching them. She had been shocked and startled when she'd discovered that Draco Malfoy was spending the summer across the street from Lupin Lodge. Although she would never admit it to Ron, or to anyone, she blamed Draco almost entirely for her parents' current condition. Ron was right. Draco had urged his father to go after the Grangers, and that was exactly what Lucius had done. In her mind, Draco deserved to be put away for life with the other Death Eaters, and she couldn't quite understand why he wasn't in prison.

On the other hand, a part of her felt that it wasn't worth giving someone like Draco Malfoy the time of day anymore. Without Voldemort to lead them, Malfoy and his cronies were really just a bunch of silly cowards, and she felt that her energy would be much better spent finding ways to help cure her parents, rather than hurling insults at old enemies.

"I didn't know that you and old Mulrod McNeirney knew each other." Ron's voice was now dangerously close and Hermione felt a surge of panic, as he advanced on their table. "Trying to buy your way onto the Falcons, Malfoy? What, are you going to get them all new broomsticks?" He laughed harshly. "I guess you learned more than just curses from your father."

Hermione winced, and shot a furious look at Ron—words like that were only going to make things worse—but Ron wasn't paying attention to her. Hermione followed his eyes to their target, and she sucked in a breath. She hadn't thought it possible for Draco Malfoy's face to be any paler than it already was, but he had turned sheet white at the mention of his father. He handed his tankard off to McNeirney and wheeled slowly to face Ron, breathing unevenly.

"Mention him again," he challenged in a whisper, his fingertips touching the end of his wand.

Ron said nothing, but his blue eyes smoldered. The two young men stood facing each other, seething with anger, making no secret of their mutual hatred. Harry moved to Ron's side with two quick steps, holding his wand up slightly. People around them edged their chairs backward, away from the possible duel.

After a rather tense moment, Malfoy turned to his blocky friend and said, "Obviously I was mistaken in thinking that this *village*—" he spat out the word as though it were the worst insult he could come up with—"—had a reputable pub. My uncle informed me that this one was satisfactory, but it's clear..." he glanced at Ron and continued "... that it's gone downhill, this summer."

McNeirney grunted, and the two of them pivoted away. McNeirney held the door open and Draco sauntered through it, tossing out a final, "I hope you left him a tip, Mulrod, honestly. I don't know how else he survives."

Ron made a choking sound, and strode quickly toward the door.

"Don't!" Hermione said desperately, her voice high-pitched.

He stopped in his tracks and looked at her. She met his eyes with a silent, pleading look. He clenched his fists and looked agitatedly at the door, which swung shut behind Draco and McNeirney.

"Son of a—" Ron began, finishing his sentence with a flourish. Hermione glanced around at the patrons of the Snout's Fair, who were still watching Ron, riveted. There were a few snorts of laughter, the sound of glasses clinking, and a shout of "Here, here!" from the corner. Ron looked toward the cheer and turned a bit red, seeming to realize for the first time that he was in public. He turned and looked at Goldie, who had taken up bartending for the moment. The older man waved at him to sit down.

"Take a moment, young Veasley," Goldie said, smiling so that his gold tooth flashed. "You will be needink a break, now."

Ron thudded immediately into a chair beside Hermione, and emitted a string of epithets, low under his breath, as Harry resumed his seat.

Hermione didn't want to hear it. She cupped Ron's face with one hand and turned his chin until he looked at her. "Forget it," she said. "He won't come back."

Ron's eyes were dark. But he stopped swearing.

"Do you really think he's bought his way onto the Falcons?" Harry asked, after a moment.

Ron exhaled loudly and shrugged, "Dunno. I just assumed. Mulrod McNeirney's not the Fal-mouth captain, but he's a pretty influential player. Been on the team for years. A lot of the other players from that team were members of Death Eater families, but he's too stupid to've been involved in much, during the war. I suspect they're trying to rebuild the team as much as possible, with the players they've got left, and you know all they care about is winning—they're used to offering top salaries and getting top players."

"And they could use some help from the Malfoy trust fund," Harry finished.

"That's my guess."

Harry looked very grave for a moment, then abruptly pushed back from the table and stood.

"Are you leaving?" Hermione asked worriedly, glancing at the door and hoping that Harry didn't plan to follow Malfoy and do something rash.

"I'm just going home," Harry said, as if he could read Hermione's thoughts. "I don't care where Malfoy went."

Ron snorted. "Yeah, well, wherever he went, we'll see him soon enough."

"I don't see why we would," said Hermione, sharply, "unless we seek him out. It's likely he'll be gone soon. Remus said that Narcissa Malfoy would only live at her brother's house until Malfoy Manor is restored. That can't take much longer, can it?"

"Doesn't matter. If he's going to be playing Quidditch, then we'll see him." Ron stood and clapped a hand on Harry's shoulder. "You might be up against the Slytherin captain again, after all. Think you can take him?"

A smile flickered across Harry's face. "I reckon it won't be a problem," he said grimly.

Ron nodded, as if he approved of this response, then headed back to Goldie and resumed working.

"Staying here?" Harry asked Hermione, picking up their empty tankards.

"I'm staying till the pub closes," Hermione answered automatically, her eyes on Ron. She wanted to talk to him. Alone. Though her agenda for the evening had changed—after Malfoy's appearance, she was no longer in the mood to risk telling Ron anything about Cortona.

"See you later, then," Harry said, and Hermione wasn't sure if it was her imagination, or if he sounded relieved to be leaving by himself.

She didn't ask. "Night, Harry."

He returned their tankards to the bar and exited the pub. Hermione made her own way up to a barstool and settled there, watching Ron spin a bottle furiously in mid-air. He looked tense and unhappy, and he hadn't even noticed her approach.

Hermione cleared her throat gently and, at the same time, Goldie prodded Ron in the ribs with his wand, causing Ron to fumble and almost drop his spinning bottle.

"You haff a customer," Goldie nudged, winking at Hermione.

"Wha—? Oh." Ron met Hermione's eyes defiantly. He was still pale behind his freckles, but he grasped the spinning bottle by the neck and came to stand in front of her, setting the liquor down between them with a decided *thud*.

Hermione said nothing. She pushed a curl behind her ear, held eye contact, and waited for him to begin what had become their usual joke.

"Haven't seen you here before," Ron finally said, his tone deceptively casual. "New to Stagsden, are you?"

"Mm-hmm." She clasped her hands in her lap and continued to look up at him. This exchange between them was usually a bit giddy, and teasing. Tonight it was something more serious—his words were joking, but his eyes were still fierce from confrontation. Hermione glanced quickly at Goldie to make sure she wasn't being watched, then turned her face up to Ron completely and let him see all her emotions in one look. Ron matched her with a look of his own, so intense that Hermione felt the back of her neck go hot and cold, together.

He drummed his fingers once, on the bar. "What'll you have, miss?" he asked lightly.

"Just water, thank you." She felt her breath shortening, under his stare. Deep down, she almost wanted him to fight Malfoy—she loved Ron and she didn't ever want his pride insulted. But neither did she want him injured, or arrested—she didn't want him to be less than what he was.

Ron nodded, filled a glass with water, and slid it across the bar. Hermione put her fingers around it and felt his fingertips caress the tops of hers, briefly. She shivered.

"I didn't fight," Ron said, so quietly that she almost missed it. "Maybe I shouldn't have said anything. But I didn't *do* anything. I meant my promise, all right?" He withdrew his hand before she could answer, and disappeared down the bar to serve another patron, leaving Hermione alone with her conflicted thoughts.

* * * * *

Ginny searched impatiently through the index of yet another book, praying that no one would come home from the Snout's Fair early. She needed time to work, and she wanted to be alone—there was no point in telling anybody what she was doing. They'd only think she'd gone mad. Tonight, she had waited until Hermione had taken Harry out of the house to go and see Ron, then thrown herself into the books with more fervor than she'd ever had in school.

Now she sat on the floor of her room, at the foot of Hermione's overstuffed bookcase, surrounded by texts that hadn't helped her at all. Nowhere could she find the recipe she needed, and the longer it took, the more her stomach hurt. She skimmed down the list of 'W' topics with her index finger, and was once again disappointed. She groaned aloud, and rubbed her temples.

"Are you all right?" came a concerned voice, from behind her.

Ginny turned to see Remus in the doorway. She snapped the book shut guiltily. "Fine," she answered, feeling her head pound harder. "Just looking for... something."

"Anything I can help you with?"

"No," she answered quickly. Too quickly, perhaps, given the way that Remus was eyeing her now. He lifted an eyebrow and looked much as Hermione had, when Ginny had told her that she was just getting ready for the school year. He looked as though he didn't quite believe her. She winced and pressed two fingers to her right temple.

It was so strange that she didn't quite believe it, but recently, every time Remus came close to her, she felt a strange pull in her stomach. In her blood. She had wondered, at first, what was causing it, but as it had grown stronger over the past few days, it had occurred to Ginny that she was feeling the approach of the full moon. Though *why* she could feel it, she had no idea. She didn't even know if she was right. She only knew that she was obsessed.

"All right," he said slowly, looking from Ginny's eyes, to the mess of books around her on the floor. He opened his mouth as if to say something about them, then shut it and shook his head. "I'm going to bed. You can wake me if you need anything. There's a very good headache powder in the pantry, behind the herbs."

Ginny made herself smile. "No, I'm fine. Goodnight, Remus."

He nodded, glanced at the books again, and went away down the hall.

The second she heard his door click shut at the end of the corridor, Ginny yanked another heavy volume from Hermione's bottom shelf. She was getting desperate. There were only a few books left, and then she'd have to raid Remus's own library. She wasn't quite sure if she wanted to risk that—he'd let them know that many of the old books in his personal study had been his father's, and that if Hermione in particular wanted to page through them, he'd prefer to be told so that he could put Bookbinding Spells on them, to keep them from falling apart.

Ginny flipped open *The Top Ten Thousand Spells and Recipes: 1997 Edition* and started muttering to herself, as she scanned down the 'W' section. "Come on. Be in here. Let *one* of these bloody books be *useful*, Hermione. Be in here, be in here, be-YES!"

She had yelled quite loudly. Ginny clapped her hand over her mouth and looked at the door, listening for Remus or Sirius. But it seemed they had slept through her cry of success. Softly, as if extreme quiet now would make up for her vocal blunder, she put her finger on the words she wanted, and read to herself in a rush.

Wolfsbane Potion

Possibly the most complex and most often-failed potion on current magical record, Wolfsbane Potion is also one of the most important in that it renders the otherwise dangerous werewolf docile on the night of the full moon. Because of its possibly lethal potency and its extreme fallibility, it is unlawful for the Magical Court Publishers' to list its recipe. The recipe is available only in professional mediwizard texts, and in The New Book of Highly Complicated and Very Likely Lethal Potions, which is made available only to licensed apothecaries and registered werewolves.

Ginny groaned again, anxiously. She shut the book and slid it back into place on the shelf, feeling her stomach churn. She had to get her hands on that book of Lethal Potions. She was going to have to check in Remus's things.

She sneaked quietly down the stairs and into the dark library, making her way to the back of the study where Remus kept his oldest volumes. Normally she wouldn't have dug into someone else's things without permission, but there was something happening in her body and mind that she couldn't quite grip. It felt like magic, but it wasn't the same as magic. It wasn't wand-magic, anyway—this energy was compulsive, it seemed to dictate actions on its own and Ginny felt she had to follow it. If she didn't follow it, she felt sick—headachy and nauseated. She wasn't sure exactly what to make of it, but she was almost positive that she could trace it to the day that Remus had given a strange look to the dead seeds in her hand.

"*Lumos.*" She ran the thin beam of wand-light over the spines of the books, feeling very much as if she were a first year invading the Hogwarts restricted section in the middle of the night. She almost expected Madam Pince to come and grip her by the shoulder, at any second. But she forgot

her tension when her light illuminated an oddly-shaped book which was buried, on its side, behind a row of thick, dusty, leather-bound publications. Ginny carefully removed these, then worked the hidden book out of its tight position at the back of the bookcase and directed her wand light at the title.

"Wow," she breathed.

The New Book of Highly Complicated and Very Likely Lethal Potions was very tall, very slender, and bound in a strange, silvery cloth. It reminded her of Remus himself. Ginny quickly replaced the books she'd removed from in front of it, then opened the silver volume in the crook of her arm and flipped it to the appropriate page, checking over her shoulder every few seconds to assure herself that she was in private. And then, convinced that it was quiet, Ginny turned her attention to the recipe she'd been trying to get her hands on all day. Quickly she read the title of the page.

Wolfsbane Potion

To be attempted by mediwizards and licensed apothecaries only.

"Do you want more light?"

Ginny gasped, jumped, and whirled around, holding the book behind her with one hand, and her wand out in front of her with the other. Though her hand trembled with a rush of startled adrenaline, the beam of her wand illuminated a pair of familiar glasses, just outside the doorway.

"Oh... Harry, it's you," Ginny managed, still gasping, only minimally relieved that it wasn't Remus. She didn't want to be caught by *anyone*, just now. She needed to work, and in private.

"Yeah." Harry stayed just outside the door, but he drew his wand and lit one of the lamps in the library.

Ginny winced in the light, and backed up a step, protective of her secret. "I don't need the light," she said quickly, "I was just picking out something to read myself to sleep with."

Harry didn't seem to notice that she was nervous—he looked rather nervous, himself. He hesitated, then stepped into the library. "Couldn't sleep?" he asked. His voice sounded a little odd.

Ginny shook her head, wishing, for the first time in her life, that Harry would just go away. She hadn't been able to talk to him since he'd come home from Azkaban, and though she'd wanted him to approach her ever since that night, he'd chosen the wrong time.

He took another step toward her, frowning slightly at her elbow. He pointed to it. "What's that?"

"What?" Ginny tightened her grip on the book, and stepped back against Remus's desk.

"Whatever you're hiding behind your back," Harry answered shrewdly, looking less nervous now, and more curious. He moved left and tried to look around her.

"It's nothing. Nox." Ginny dropped her wand on the desk and began to untie her dressing gown with her free hand. There was nothing else for it. She didn't want to be caught with this book—she didn't want to explain what she was on about—she only wanted to get upstairs and get back to the potion recipe. Her head throbbed, and she squinted her eyes. She tugged her dressing gown open.

Harry watched what her hand was doing, his mouth open slightly, then seemed to remember himself, and looked up at her face.

Ginny knew she was blushing, but she continued on, working her arm out of the dressing gown until it fell by her side. She spun around, yanked her other arm from its sleeve, wrapped the dressing gown quickly around the book of potions, and turned back to Harry, hugging the odd package to her chest.

He stared at her. "That's... some highly classified bedtime reading." Harry looked as if he was fighting not to laugh.

"Yes. Well. Goodnight." Ginny grabbed up her wand, hefted the book closer to her, and tried to walk around Harry on the right. He stepped to the side and blocked her, peering at the wrapped book as if he'd be able to see through the dressing gown and read the title. Ginny looked down and realized that one silvery corner was sticking up, and she tucked it in immediately.

"Night," she said breathlessly, and moved to get around him on the left.

Harry laughed, this time, and blocked her a second time. "I've been in training," he reminded her, stepping deftly to the right as she tried to dodge around him again.

Ginny stopped and looked straight at him. They were very close—so close that she could feel his chest brush against her bare arms, which were crossed over the book. He was half-grinning at her, looking as if he was enjoying teasing her, and Ginny made a noise of frustrated panic. On the one hand, she had to get upstairs—her stomach ached and she wanted nothing more than to be working on this potion, regardless of whether it was going to be a futile attempt.

On the other hand, it was *Harry*.

"Please, let me go—" she blurted, "I have to work on this or I'll just feel sick."

His smile vanished. He stepped back at once, the playfulness gone from his demeanor. Instead he looked worried, and hurt.

"Er-okay," he said awkwardly, sounding self-conscious again, as he had when he'd first entered the library. He broke eye contact with her and moved out of her way, his face red.

Ginny breathed a sigh of relief and went quickly out of the library and toward the stairs. She was halfway up them when a feeling, very like the nausea she had been feeling in her stomach, suddenly touched her heart. He had looked hurt. He'd only been curious about her. And she had always so much *wanted* him to be curious about her that it suddenly felt stupid, to leave him in the dark. She'd felt, for years, that she was in love with Harry—shouldn't she try to confide in him, if that was really true?

She turned around swiftly, ready to go back and find him, and drew a sharp breath of surprise to find that he was already there waiting, at the bottom of the stairs.

"Sorry," he mumbled, avoiding her eyes. "Not trying to sneak up—"

"Where are Ron and Hermione?" Ginny interrupted, looking over his shoulder, toward the corridor.

Harry looked at her oddly. "Er—they're still at the pub."

"When are they coming back?"

"Hermione said she's staying till it closes."

"Two hours," Ginny mused, searching Harry's eyes for a long moment. He stood there and watched her, looking both uneasy and intrigued. "Okay, Harry," she finally said, screwing up her courage. "Come with me."

She turned and led the way unhesitatingly into the girls' bedroom. She waited until Harry had followed her inside, then locked the door with her wand and turned to face him. His eyes were wide and he didn't seem to know quite what to do with his hands. He shoved them in his pockets.

"Hermione'll kill you for letting one of us in here," he mumbled, after a moment, looking at his shoes uncertainly.

Ginny ignored this. "Harry Potter," she said warningly, "if you breathe one word of what I'm about to tell you, then I *will* make you suffer. Promise me you'll keep it secret."

Harry's jaw dropped.

"Promise now, or leave." Ginny pointed to the door.

"I promise," Harry said hastily. "I promise. Can I see the book?"

Ginny nodded, satisfied, and handed it over. Harry untangled it from the dressing gown, which he held between two fingers and placed gingerly on the nearest chair, then returned his attention to the cover. His eyebrows shot up.

"Very likely lethal—what d'you need this for?"

Ginny told him. She told him about the dead seeds—about the strange feelings she'd been having—how she felt she'd been walking into walls in the air around Remus, how she could feel the full moon coming on and didn't know why. She told him how her stomach and head had been aching, and confessed that she only felt better when she was working on compiling the Wolfsbane Potion. She told him of her visits to the village apothecary's, and of how she'd been wandering through Remus's garden and the woods, looking for the things they'd always used in Potions class, at school. She threw open her trunk and pulled out a wooden box filled with corked vials, bundles of herbs and bags of powder, all guesses she'd made of what ingredients she'd need to collect for the recipe.

She talked for what felt like an hour, and Harry listened, raptly attentive. "Have you asked Remus about any of this?" he asked, when she finally took a breath.

"No. I'm afraid he'll tell me not to try it, and I *have* to try it. I know I'm insane, I know that Snape was the only wizard around here that could do it right. Otherwise why would Remus go so far north to a special apothecary, to get the potion every month?"

"Does he?" Harry looked shocked.

"Yes. And I know the potion will never work if I brew it, but it would make things so much easier on him if he could just stay here and transform—I wish I was good enough at things like this—but it doesn't matter if it works or not. I can't stop working on it."

Harry didn't answer for a moment. He pushed his glasses up on his nose. "Why won't it work if you brew it?" he asked simply.

Ginny blinked, surprised by both the question, and the confidence it implied. "I'm... only seventeen. I got average marks in Potions," she answered unsteadily.

"And I got average marks in Charms," Harry said dryly.

Ginny had never heard him refer, even abstractly, to what he had accomplished with *Expecto Sacrificum*. But he was looking at her now as if to say that if he could defeat Voldemort with a

charm, then she could make a successful Wolfsbane Potion. Her throat grew dry and her heart pounded.

He was right.

"I can try to help," Harry offered quickly, looking down at the book in his hand, "not that I was much with Potions, either." He pulled his wand. "*Accio!*" he said sharply, drawing parchment, quill and ink into one spot on Ginny's desk, displacing a disgruntled Crookshanks from that surface, where he had been napping. Harry lay the book down, opened it to the page of the Wolfsbane recipe, and charmed the quill to copy down the page. "What next?" he said, when he was done. "How far have you got with everything else?"

"To be honest, I haven't even read that recipe yet."

Together, they perused the list of necessary items, collecting the ones that Ginny had already acquired and piling them up in one place. Harry ran downstairs at one point and came back, floating an enormous iron cauldron in front of him.

"Hermione's going to notice that in here," Ginny said dubiously.

"We'll put everything you're using in it, stick it in your closet, and make it invisible," Harry replied. "That way you can have it all in one spot when you go to start working. Where are you going to brew it?"

"I don't know, I haven't thought that far ahead. Where did you used to brew your illegal things?"

Harry laughed. "The girls' bathroom. Myrtle's toilet."

"And to think, I never thought I'd miss Myrtle," Ginny replied, laughing as well. She grew quite serious after a moment, though. "I don't know, Harry. It takes a full week to prepare Wolfsbane Potion. I'm going to have to tell Remus and get permission, so that I can do it properly, on the fire. He'll never let me."

"He'll let you."

"But it's so advanced—"

"He will, I'm telling you. He's like that. He's the one who taught me my Patronus, when I was thirteen."

"I never knew that! He taught you?"

"Yeah. I was in his office one day asking him to do it, actually, and Snape came in with a goblet full of this stuff—" Harry gestured to the cauldron as if it already held simmering Wolfsbane Potion. "At the time, I thought Snape was trying to poison him, to get the Dark Arts position."

Ginny snickered, and handed Harry a packet of Moonstone powder and the vial of wolfsbane. "I wouldn't have put it past Snape, back then," she agreed, watching Harry settle the ingredients carefully in amongst the other things in the cauldron. "Although, nasty or not... I'm sorry he's gone," she ventured. "I never imagined I could miss Snape, but I do. It's odd, thinking of Hogwarts ever starting up again, without him."

Harry straightened up and caught her eyes. "Unreal, isn't it?" he said quietly.

It was the closest they had ever come to having an honest exchange about the war, and Ginny was smart enough to leave well enough alone. She nodded, then touched her finger to the recipe and frowned. "'Boiled brain of sheep—'" she read aloud "'to be entirely intact when added to your cauldron.' Not only is that disgusting, but I don't know how to properly boil a brain so that it stays intact. We never did that in class."

"You'd've learned it seventh year," Harry said, "and Hermione can do it better than anyone. Just ask her, when the time comes, and she'll be happy to show you."

"Oh, I'm sure she will."

They grinned knowingly at each other.

"So, what do we still need?" Harry walked over to stand beside her, and peered down at the recipe, dragging a finger down the page. "A half-pint of wolf's blood, shredded human skin—" Harry and Ginny shuddered together "—and scales from the middle head of a Runespoor. I don't know where you're going to get any of that."

"They have the wolf's blood at the apothecary here," Ginny mused. "I'll get it the day I need it, so it's not spoiled. I guess I'll have to talk to Charlie tomorrow."

"What—send him to Knockturn Alley to pick up the rest? He's up at Azkaban, so you might want to ask Bill, instead."

"Azkaban?" Ginny asked, suddenly anxious. "What are you talking about?"

"He was up there two days ago, with Moody," Harry explained. "He's the one that woke me up after I brought back the Dementor. Something about using dragons to guard the island. He says they have the right energy."

Ginny snorted. "Him and his dragons, I swear. We'll have a dragon taking over the Ministry for

Dad any day now." But she grew quickly sober and sighed, thinking of the ingredients that were lost to her. "I can forget it. Bill's nearly as bad as Percy was, when it comes to me. He'll never send me any of that stuff."

"What do you mean?"

"He thinks I'm five years old, and if I ask him for shredded skin of a human, he'll tell me to stick to something less dangerous. I'd've been better off asking Percy, honestly. At least he went to school with me for a bit and knew I wasn't still in nappies."

"What if I asked Bill?"

Ginny turned slightly toward Harry, and studied his profile. "Would you do that?" she asked, in surprise. "You wouldn't mind? He'd send you anything you asked for."

"I'll do it first thing, when I get back from practice tomorrow."

Ginny looked at him, wondering how something so simple could make her so happy. "Thank you," she said softly.

Harry didn't say anything. He removed his finger from the list of ingredients and dropped his hand to his side. A moment later, Ginny felt his fingers fumble for hers, until he was holding her hand.

They stood there together, Ginny barely breathing, staring down at the Wolfsbane recipe as though it was the most mesmerizing thing in the world. Her heart hammered frantically and she wondered what came next—what he would do—what it meant between them, now. This was deliberate, this was sure.

He cared for her.

"*Alohomora!*"

Ginny and Harry gasped simultaneously, unclasped their hands, and turned to see Hermione standing in the door, her wand halfway raised. She was staring at them, apparently rendered speechless; she stood frozen with her mouth hanging open, gaping into the room.

Harry reacted first. He strode to the door and blocked it. "You can't come in," he said staunchly, putting his palms flat on either side of the door frame.

"Excuse me?" Hermione challenged, trying to push under his arm. "This is *my* room!"

"Not right now," Harry said, cutting her off before she could get past. "In a minute."

Ginny snapped into action, knowing that Harry could only buy so much time. Frantically she stuffed *The New Book of Highly Complicated and Very Likely Lethal Potions* under her covers, then dashed back to the giant cauldron. She quickly floated it to sit on the floor between her wall and the bed, not wanting to move it across the room and into Hermione's line of sight. But she still had to make it invisible.

"Harry!" she hissed. "I can't remember the charm to make it—you know—"

"Make it WHAT?" Hermione demanded, so loudly that both Ginny and Harry said, "Shhh!"

Ron's head appeared in the door. He looked easily over Harry's head, and into the room. "What've you got there, Gin? Something secret?"

Ginny leapt in front of the cauldron and glared at him. "Get out, Ron!" she called hotly. Crookshanks jumped up on the bed and yowled helpfully in his direction, as well. "This isn't your business! And shut up, everybody, you're going to wake Remus and Sirius! Now give me one second in private to clean up my things!"

Ron smiled tauntingly at her, making no move to leave. He shrugged lazily, looked from Ginny to Harry and back again, and raised a meaningful eyebrow. "Oh, take your time," he said, grinning. "No rush. We'll just switch for a bit. Hermione?"

"No—Ron, honestly, I want to see what she's—"

But Ron had already dragged Hermione out of view and somehow effectively silenced her. A moment later, Ginny heard the door to the boys' room slam shut.

Suddenly, the room felt very quiet. And suddenly Ginny was aware that it was, indeed, a bedroom, and that she was in it with Harry, who had just been holding her hand. She also became conscious of the breeze from the open window, which played on the skin of her arms and throat. She was wearing nothing but her nightdress. In the midst of discussing the potion, nothing like that had mattered. But when Harry turned away from the door and came back into the room again, Ginny felt exposed, and very unsure of herself.

He seemed to be thinking the same things. His eyes flickered to her nightdress, and then instantly away to the wall. He made a funny, throat-clearing noise.

Ginny reached for the dressing gown on her chair and put it on quickly, feeling hot all over. "I should clean up," she said faintly, and began to roll up the parchment that now held the recipe. She bound it, and put it in the cauldron with the other things.

Harry seemed determined to help as well, as if keeping occupied would keep embarrassment at bay. He gathered up all of the vials and bags which weren't going to be useful, put them back in their box, and replaced it in the trunk. "Those two were in a better mood than I expected," he said abruptly, after several silent minutes.

"Oh? Were they in a fight?" Ginny asked immediately, wanting to sound normal and talk easily, the way they'd been doing before.

"No." Harry flew the cauldron into the closet and Charmed it quickly, rendering it invisible. "Malfoy dropped by the Snout's Fair."

Ginny gaped at him. "What? Why didn't you tell me that?"

"I forgot all about it."

"Oh," said Ginny, flattered by that statement. "Well, what did he do?"

"The usual routine. Insulted Hermione, insulted me, insulted Ron—"

"And lived to see another day?" Ginny asked doubtfully. "Has he gone mad or was he just drunk?"

"No, he had a big friend with him."

Ginny made a noise of disgust. "What a coward, honestly. His whole life is just going to be a misery. I can't even get angry at him, anymore—not even for what the Death Eaters did to Percy. I want to hate him, but I just can't."

"I know." Harry sighed, and pushed back his hair, revealing his scar for a brief second before his fringe fell over it again. Ginny involuntarily stopped what she was doing, to look at it. "Looks like we're going to see more of him, though. He's trying out for the Falcons and I think he's bought his way right onto the team."

"He did *not*," Ginny breathed. "He's not playing for Falmouth. Tell me that's not true."

"Wish it wasn't."

"Oh, I could just..." Ginny clenched her fists, then threw back her covers with a vengeance and snatched up the potions book from underneath them. "He can't even *play*! Not like a professional—not like you."

Harry turned red.

"Well it's true," Ginny said, too irritated to care what she was saying. "You've never bought your way onto anything. You've practiced just like everybody else..." She trailed off, realizing for the first time that Harry was still *in* his practices, and that it was nearly one o'clock in the morning. "Harry! You have to be at the pitch in four and a half hours!" she exclaimed. "Although I don't see why you have to go tomorrow, since it's Saturday."

"I have to go both days, this weekend, to make up for the time I missed," Harry answered ruefully.

"That hardly seems right, does it?" Ginny asked, crossing her arms over the book and thinking that Oliver Wood could stand to calm down a little bit, where Quidditch was concerned.

"Oliver's just trying to be fair to everyone else," Harry said. "I'll be fine. I used to play on no sleep all the time." He moved to the door and glanced warily down the hall, as if unwilling to go to his own room, where he would risk interrupting Ron and Hermione.

"Want me to... break them up?" Ginny asked awkwardly, thinking it was strange to stand so close to Harry and think about what Ron and Hermione might be doing, in the next room.

"No, no— I'll sleep on the couch."

"Harry, really..."

"It's fine." He pulled Remus's potions book out of Ginny's arms. "Here, I'll put this back."

"Are you sure? You have to put it sideways behind the leather books, on the third shelf down, by the desk. Maybe I should do it." She reached for the book, but Harry shook his head, and held onto it.

"I'll go and figure it out."

But he didn't go anywhere. Instead, he stood and looked at her for a long moment. He swallowed so hard that she could see his Adam's apple bob in his throat. He took an audible breath.

And then, to Ginny's great surprise, Harry leaned forward and very carefully kissed her cheek.

She shut her eyes and breathed in, smelling soap and grass, feeling the frame of his glasses touch her face as his mouth brushed her skin. She put out a hand for balance, and touched her fingertips to his arm, but it was over before it even began. Harry's nose softly scraped her cheekbone as he pulled away, leaving a trail of electrified skin.

"Night, Ginny," he said hoarsely, and disappeared down the stairs without looking back.

Ginny stood in the doorway for a full five minutes, unable to grasp what had just happened. All of it. Harry had been here, with her. Helping her. Talking with her as if they'd always been

companions, giving her confidence, protecting her secrets, holding her hand—kissing her cheek.

Dazedly, she made her way to her bed, put out the lights, and lay down on her back. She stared up at the ceiling, lost in thought. Harry had left a mark on her skin, where his lips had touched her. Her head and stomach aches were gone—perhaps because she had made so much progress on the potion. Her fingers remembered the deliberate grip of Harry's hand. Next week, she would go to Remus and ask for his permission to continue making the Wolfsbane Potion. Harry believed she was capable of it.

Crookshanks purred deeply from the corner, and Ginny understood the cat's sound of contentment. Feeling strangely as if Harry was lying there beside her, instead of sleeping downstairs on the couch, Ginny turned on her side, hugged her pillow, and quickly dropped off to sleep.

A/N: To everyone at the Sugar Quill, who proved this week that friendship and community are stronger than fear and hatred. And especially to Ginny Potter, whose own words and feelings make appearances in this chapter. Thank you for everything, GP, in fiction and in life.

Care of Magical Creatures

Remus felt a bit odd knocking on the door of his own study. But if he had learned anything in his years as a teacher, it was that when the students wanted to be taken seriously, they should be. Ginny had approached him in the garden earlier that day and asked if he would meet her in the study after dinner. She'd looked preoccupied and tired, and whatever she wanted, Remus knew that to her, at least, it was very important.

Besides, Ginny had been acting strangely around him all week and he was curious to find out why. His students had always been comfortable around him, and the same had been true with Ginny until recently. During the last two weeks, she'd seemed to be almost afraid of him, and he'd noticed that she had taken to spending a lot of time up in her room. He'd tried not to let it bother him, but it obviously had; he'd been relieved when she had come to talk to him—relieved that she didn't fear him. He wondered if he would ever get over the insecurities of being a classified "beast". Even after years of acceptance by his Marauder fellows, he still doubted everyone else's capacity for tolerance.

"Ginny?" he called, and knocked on the door once more. He wondered if perhaps she had put their appointment aside in lieu of something more exciting. She and Harry had been poring over a package that had arrived earlier in the afternoon, talking in very low voices, and Remus hadn't been able to help noticing how close they had been sitting. Nor had he missed the look on Ginny's face when Harry had shot her a smile on his way out the door to visit Ron at the pub. It had been a trusting, encouraging sort of smile. It had reminded Remus very much of James, and he wouldn't have been surprised if it had caused Ginny to forget their meeting.

But the appointment hadn't been forgotten. Remus nearly jumped backwards as the study door was flung open. Ginny stood in the middle of the doorway, blocking his view of the room. She wore her black school robes with the sleeves rolled up, as if she had come ready to work, and her hair was pulled out of her face, giving her an air of professionalism. Her face was flushed. When she spoke, it was with serious urgency, though her voice shook.

"Can you sit down?" she asked. She stepped aside and let him in. "Would you mind sitting down? This will take a few minutes—I have a lot to show you and you're probably not going to like it."

Remus was startled, but he tried not to betray it as he took a seat, wondering what on earth she could possibly have to show him, and hoping that she was quite all right. He looked up at her, questioningly.

"Okay," she said, almost to herself. "I can do this—and Remus, please—no, never mind. Okay."

She was behaving very oddly. Feeling concerned now, as well as curious, Remus watched narrowly as Ginny raised her wand and brought out, from behind the study desk, an enormous cauldron. It was full to the brim with what looked to be potion ingredients, and though Remus could identify very few of them without actually examining them closely, he knew that she must be making something very complicated. He pulled his brows together, wondering if she was going to enlist his help on some sort of project. He thought wryly that he ought to inform her that he hadn't been much of a success in Potions, but decided to wait and hear her out.

"What's all this?" he asked, as neutrally as he could.

Ginny didn't answer for a moment. She searched his face, and as she did so, Remus noticed that her skin was terribly pale, and almost clammy. She looked ill. He eyed the cauldron with new worry. Maybe she was attempting to make a medicinal potion of some kind—maybe she was sick. What would he tell Arthur?

Before he could ask her what the matter was, Ginny held out her hands to stop him from talking. She drew an enormous, audible breath, clasped her fingers together and unclasped them

again, looking feverishly overexcited.

"I know you're going to tell me this is none of my business," she began, in a rush, "and you're right, it isn't. But I can't help it, I've been working on this for weeks and I can't stop—I feel sick if I don't work on it—please don't be angry with me, when I tell you." She stopped for another breath and looked at him, as if afraid to continue.

Remus was now on alert. He moved to the edge of his seat, nearing the end of his patience. Was she doing something illegal? Was she in some kind of trouble?

"Ginny," he asked gravely, "what's happening? Whatever it is, you need to tell me."

She nodded and swallowed, hard. Then she pulled a piece of rolled up parchment out of her pocket and handed it to him, then stepped well back and watched him, her eyes bright and almost defiant. She looked like she might come out of her skin if he didn't read the parchment right away, and so Remus unrolled it, feeling terribly anxious and having absolutely no idea what to expect. He braced himself for the worst, held the scroll open with both hands, and glanced down at its title.

Wolfsbane Potion

Recipe and Brewing Instructions

Tension rose up immediately in his blood, and Remus gave a dry, rasping sort of breath as he scanned the recipe, looking at the all-too-familiar list of sickening ingredients. Sheep's brains, to effect a docile state. Scales of the middle head of a Runespoor, to induce a dreamlike stupor. Wolfsbane, to poison him just enough that he would be too weak to claw and snarl. Shredded human skin, to satiate the wolf's terrible craving for flesh.

Remus shuddered, hating himself again, for reasons he would never be able to control. He continued to stare at the parchment, not really seeing it, remembering dimly that Ginny Weasley had handed it to him. He couldn't begin to understand why she would write out such a thing and he found that he didn't want to look up at her. It was one thing for Ginny to ask him about being a werewolf. Her curiosity was natural and inoffensive. It was entirely another for her to involve herself in the intimacies of the processes he was forced to go through. This was not an experience he wished to share, in all its morbid details. Only his most trusted friends had ever been near him, at his terrible moments of transformation. Only Sirius was allowed to broach this subject with him now.

"Why..." he began, forcing himself to look up, though he wasn't sure what to say. He was too unsettled to make sense of his thoughts, which were somewhere between anger and self-disgust. "Where did you..."

"I got it from your book," Ginny confessed, looking very guilty. "The silver one you keep hidden behind your dad's old classics. I went through your things. I'm so sorry, Remus, I know I should've asked, but I was afraid you'd tell me I wasn't allowed near it, and I had to find out about this recipe—I've been feeling very strange things whenever you come around me, and I think it's because you're a werewolf."

Remus flinched, and Ginny shook her head quickly, her eyes wide.

"No! I don't mean it in a bad way—I don't care about that, I'm not afraid of you, but I think... I think I feel what you're feeling." She looked to be casting around for words. "I... don't know how to explain it. I don't know how I know. But my blood feels like it's moving faster. The full moon's in two weeks and I swear, this gets worse as we get nearer to it."

Attempting to stay calm and organize his thoughts, Remus put his hands on the arms of his chair, and held on. "What gets worse?" he asked faintly, positive that his fears were irrational but unable to get rid of them, nonetheless. He remembered the first full moon's approach, after he had been bitten. He'd only been a child. There had been an agitated sickness, a sweaty and frightened anticipation, and a physical sensation in every pore as if the tides were turning his blood over in his veins. It had approached without mercy, and he had been unable to stop it. His parents had tried to explain to him what was coming; they had understood what the bite-marks meant and had worked to prepare him. Even now, Remus wanted to laugh at the futility of their efforts. The wolf still came every month, and each time, he was still caught entirely unprepared.

Ginny couldn't possibly be experiencing that. He wouldn't allow it, and in any case, they would have known if she'd been bitten.

She was safe from that hell. Still, she looked confused, and frustrated, as she attempted to answer his question.

"My stomach feels jumpy. My... skin. It's like, you come in to a room, and I feel all agitated. I can tell if you've come in, even if I don't hear you. It's the weirdest... And I didn't know why, but then suddenly last week I found myself digging through Hermione's books, looking for the Wolfsbane Potion recipe, and as soon as I looked for it, I felt better. It calmed me down. So I kept working. I

just knew I had to keep working, and I can't explain it any better than that. It's like... remember the way I knew those seeds were dead?" Ginny clapped her hands together. "It's exactly like that! I just-know."

Remus looked at her sharply, remembering full well the way in which she had separated the dead seeds from the live ones in the garden. He'd thought, at that moment, that she might be exhibiting signs of a very rare magic. Her sudden drive to work with medicinal potions was certainly another possible sign... but he shook off the thought as quickly as he could. She wasn't exhibiting anything. It was far more likely that she was merely coping with the end of the war and the death of her brother. Everyone was dealing with the aftermath in personal ways, and if Ginny was choosing to throw herself into complicated recipes and forbidden books, then that was perfectly understandable. Remus admitted to himself that it didn't seem terribly *like* Ginny—but then perhaps he didn't know her very well.

"So you looked until you found the recipe?" he prompted, watching her carefully.

"Yes, and when I found it, I started gathering up what I needed. It's taken me awhile, but now I've got everything," she declared, a note of pride creeping into her voice.

Remus blinked. "What do you mean, you've got everything?" He felt an odd fear nagging at his brain, and he refused to fully comprehend what she was saying. She couldn't actually be considering... because that was unacceptable. "Everything for what?"

"The Wolfsbane Potion." Ginny said matter-of-factly. She seemed less nervous, now, as she turned to the cauldron and began to unload it, bit by bit, onto the great desk. "I have all the ingredients—well, except for two, but those are perishable."

"All?" Remus had a hard time imagining where she might have got her hands on some of the necessary items.

She looked at him confidently. "All," she affirmed, and proceeded to list the ingredients from beginning to end. Then, gesturing to the parchment that Remus still had pinned under his hand, she began to talk about the brewing process with calm authority.

Remus listened without interruption, his trepidation growing with every word she spoke, though everything out of her mouth was very right. She had clearly done her research; her knowledge of the potion was quite complete, and she must have gone to great lengths to acquire both the information and the materials.

"I've read everything I can get my hands on," she said, in closing, "about the advanced methods of ingredient preparation and advanced techniques for long term potion brewing, since this one's on the fire for a week before it's ready. And my brother sent me the rare ingredients from Knockturn Alley, just today. As soon as I prepare those, I'll be completely set up." She looked at him pleadingly, keeping her hands clasped together in front of her. "So... I'd have to start tomorrow..."

"Tomorrow," Remus repeated blankly. He shook his head, still unwilling to make sense of her intentions. "But you don't want to *make* the Wolfsbane Potion, Ginny." Even as he said it, he knew that he was wrong, and he gripped the arms of his chair again. From beneath his right hand came the sound of crumpling parchment, but neither he nor Ginny paid any attention to the recipe. Their eyes locked.

"Yes I do," she said quietly, and in her face was a determination Remus recognized. She had looked very much like this on the day that they'd built the Sacrificum Charm in Harry. "I need to try. Please let me—please say that I can have permission to make it."

There was a long silence between them while Remus tried to think of what to say. Normally, he would have hated to disappoint a student, but this was different. She wasn't his student, any longer, and he couldn't allow her to administer a self-made Wolfsbane Potion—at best, she would fail and at worst, she'd poison him. Still, she looked desperate for him to say yes—quite as if this was *her* life or death moment, not his.

But it was simply too high a risk, for both of them. He couldn't let her do it, and he opened his mouth to tell her so.

"You have my permission," he heard himself say.

Ginny jumped and put a hand to her mouth. "R-really?" she whispered, through her fingers. "Remus, are you sure?"

His mind raced. Was he insane? He was resigning himself to an evening of anguish for the first time in months—transforming into the full-fledged wolf was nothing short of pure hell. Transforming with the aid of the potion was bad enough. It was *always* bad enough, just knowing that he harbored a sick desire to murder, in some secret, locked-up part of himself. He never again wanted his mind to run mad, at the full moon. It was hard to explain it to regular people, but each time the wolf took him over, it tore out a part of his soul. Intellectually he understood that he was not to blame for the wolf's urges; in his body, however, and in the darkest parts of his mind, Remus

knew what he truly was. He knew—and he had no desire to live the proof of it ever again. Since the discovery of the Wolfsbane Potion, he had promised himself that he would go to any lengths to obtain it, in order to preserve his own sanity. He had trusted Snape when there was no one else to trust. He now endured the humiliation of the apothecary's habitat and though it made him feel like an animal, at least he was spared the grief of feeling like a killer.

"Remus?" Ginny repeated softly.

He had forgotten she was there, standing before him, waiting for reconfirmation. He looked up and silently studied her, still thinking. If an inexperienced witch like Ginny brewed the potion, he knew that the odds were slim to none that it would be successful. He would be hungry, again. He would be enraged. He would have to be locked in the shed, and he would tear at his own flesh, if he couldn't get to any other prey. Not to mention that Sirius was going to kill him, when he found out what a foolish risk he was taking. It was lunacy, to take on so much pain, yet his instincts told him to trust her. He blamed it on his willingness to go too far, as a teacher—Ginny had been his student, and now he had the chance to guide her through a unique opportunity. She was showing an interest, and she ought to be encouraged.

"Yes. I'm sure," he finally answered, and though he congratulated himself on being a very liberal professor, Remus knew deep down that this had nothing to do with his teacher's principles. He had an unfounded faith in Ginny's ability, which he could not rationalize.

She was staring down at him, apparently still unable to believe what he was saying.

"You said you'd have to start tomorrow?" he asked. He rolled up the recipe parchment and handed it back to her, then gestured to the ingredients on the desk. "What are you still missing?"

Ginny seemed to jerk awake. "I have to go into the village, in the morning, for the wolf's blood and sheep's brain." Her voice shook, and Remus wondered if perhaps the gravity of what she had decided to do was catching up with her. She looked at once relieved and frightened.

Remus nodded. "I want you to use the fireplace in here," he instructed. "We need to keep the front room fireplace open for travel and contact, and the kitchen fire is not only too small, but it's considered very unsafe—"

"To brew medicinal potions openly, in areas where they can contaminate food. I know." Ginny smiled slightly. "Told you I've been doing my reading."

"Yes." Remus smiled back at her, briefly, feeling unaccountably hopeful. He wanted her to succeed. He didn't care if it was irrational and unlikely—he very much wanted this to work. He stood up. "I'll give you your privacy, if you like. You're welcome to prepare your materials on the desk, though you'll have to do a Sanitation Charm first."

"I'll need to grab my tools. They're upstairs." Ginny was still staring at him. "You're really going to let me do this," she said, obviously stunned. "Harry said you would. He said you were that kind of person, and I know you let him learn the Patronus a bit early—and you were the best Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher I ever had—but I wasn't sure...."

Remus was touched. He had only taught at Hogwarts for one year, yet his students' faith in him had somehow remained high. "I know you'll do your best to get it right," he said gently. He wanted to tell her that she had better damn well make *sure* to get it right, but somehow, that didn't seem appropriate.

"I will," Ginny swore. "You don't have to drink it if you think it isn't right."

"I'll drink it." Remus stepped closer and surveyed the carefully labeled bottles and bags that Ginny had lined up on the desk. His stomach tightened with fear—and something else. Something he hadn't felt about the full moon since the days when it had still held a promise of racing through the Forbidden Forest with his Animagi friends. Excitement. "I need to take the first dose seven days prior to the full moon, as I'm sure you already know," he said, in what he hoped was an even tone. "You'll just need to make sure that it's complete by—"

"Moony! You will NOT believe—"

Ginny spun around so quickly that her ponytail continued to move seconds after she had.

Remus jerked his head toward the door and saw Sirius standing by a bookcase, looking unusually excited about something. He had recently taken to Apparating home in the study rather than in the sunroom in order to deposit his things before seeing anyone else, a point that had slipped Remus's mind earlier in the day when he'd agreed to meet with Ginny. Of course, at the time, he hadn't realized that Ginny would want to talk about something so important.

The almost joyful expression on Sirius's face faded as he took in the scene in the study. "What's going on? Is everything okay?" He looked quickly at Ginny. "Where's Harry? Is Harry—"

"Everything's fine, Sirius," Remus said lightly, attempting a grin. "It's nothing. Harry's in the village with Ron and Hermione. Ginny and I were just having a talk, that's all."

But Sirius had thrown down his enormous briefcase and taken a few steps forward, his gaze now upon the ingredients that were neatly lined up on the desk. Frowning, he picked up a vial containing the scales of a Runespoor, and turned it over slowly in his hand. He returned it to its place among the other containers and pulled out a small paper bag labeled 'Moonstone powder'. He turned slightly pale.

"Interesting ingredients," he said quietly, looking straight at Remus. "Planning on brushing up on your Potions skills?"

"Actually," said Ginny, moving between Sirius and the desk, and forcing him to step back, "I'm the one who's working on a project." She shot Remus a harried look. He was not surprised that she'd picked up on the fact that he'd rather discuss this with Sirius alone.

"Oh?" Sirius asked coolly, crossing his arms. "What kind of project? Must be very advanced if you're planning on using Runespoor scales and Moonstone powder together. As a matter of fact," Sirius's voice was growing lower, "I can only think of one potion in which both of these ingredients are used—" He reached around Ginny, deftly grabbed a small, opaque bottle marked 'wolfsbane', and dangled it between two fingers, looking murderous. "What the hell's going on?" he demanded.

Remus felt his stomach tie itself into a knot, but he managed to give Ginny a nod. "Ginny, why don't you take your things upstairs for tonight? You can set up in here a bit later on." He felt terrible for making her drag the cauldron all the way back upstairs, especially since he had just invited her to use the study as her work space, but he didn't quite trust Sirius's actions if left in the same room with the potion ingredients.

Nodding, Ginny pointed her wand at her materials, which packed themselves quickly into the cauldron. "Accio," she finished calmly, making the little bottle of wolfsbane fly from Sirius's fingers into her own. Quickly, she floated her cauldron through the door. Remus raised his wand to shut the door after her, but Sirius was now standing inches away from him, his pale-blue eyes narrowed.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?" Sirius asked in a would-be-calm voice.

Remus lowered his wand and surveyed him without a word, not sure how to approach an explanation without getting a bit explosive, himself. Sirius had always been violent towards people who posed a threat to Remus's safety, and though Remus understood that Sirius's overprotection was the result of many years of secrecy and dedicated friendship, it still rankled him that he would now be expected to justify his decision to trust Ginny with the potion. It would be a difficult decision to account for, at the best of times—and Sirius wasn't at his best, at the moment. On the contrary, he had been spending long hours overworking himself in London and at Culparrat. The briefcase that he'd thrown on the floor upon his arrival was filled with case files. Remus had been spending his own days at home, poring over them, trying to glean any possible information of importance, in an effort to help relieve his workload, but Sirius refused to work at a reasonable pace. He wasn't sleeping. He wasn't enlisting help. *He* was the one who deserved a lecture.

"Ginny has asked my permission to make the Wolfsbane Potion this month," Remus said simply, deciding that straightforward honesty was the quickest way to start and end the unavoidable argument.

Sirius's eyes narrowed even further. "Well, that's not really a good one for her to practice with," he said, slowly and distinctly. "I mean, she won't be able to *test* it anywhere, will she?"

Remus nodded his head firmly, once.

Sirius's jaw dropped. "You can't be serious," he hissed.

"No, *you're* Sirius," Remus joked through gritted teeth, walking around the large desk in order to push a large pile of case files towards his friend. It was time to try and change the subject. "These are for you, they've been marked up. There's some really interesting information in there on Simon Flannery. I never would have guessed when we were in school with him."

Sirius would not be sidetracked. Ignoring Remus's comment, he strode over to a bookshelf and, after a moving his finger across the spines of several books, found what he was looking for. He pulled a small, green, barely used book from the shelf, and meaningfully slapped it against his hand.

Remus sighed. The book was called *Calming the Wolf: Development of the Wolfsbane Potion*, and it detailed the horrors of the first batches that had been used. "I don't need a reading-to," he said, his voice low. "If you'd like to discuss this, then there are better ways—"

But Sirius opened the book to a random page and began to read aloud. "Early on it was thought that the proportion of dragon's blood to wolfsbane should be three to one. However, when this version of the potion was tested on Ivan Berndt, a German werewolf, he not only transformed at full strength, on the night of the full moon, but he was also rendered fiercer than ever before. Able to break free from his restraints for the first time in his life, he tore out his wife's throat and ate it, then proceeded to mutilate his children."

Remus felt ill. Those were the things he was capable of. "I am fully aware," he said faintly, "of every story in that book. I am also aware that the old combinations have been removed from the list of ingredients."

Sirius continued to read, with more force. "It was then decided that more wolfsbane should be added, in the hopes that the poison would render a werewolf incapable of attack. The unfortunate result of this experiment was the death of not one, but six werewolves, who bravely volunteered to try potions at different strengths. Even *now*," and Sirius stressed the word with all the venom in his voice, "though we have reached a successful recipe, if the vital ingredient is not measured with perfect exactness, the Wolfsbane Potion will not only be ineffective, it will be *deadly*."

"Shut that book," Remus said, his voice like iron. "I don't need to hear that."

Sirius shut the book, but did not let up. "I think you *do*," he countered, "if you're going to put your life in the hands of—"

"Unless Ginny's hand slips," Remus felt his voice getting louder as his temper got the better of him, "and she adds an enormous quantity of the wolfsbane itself—which somehow, I doubt she'll do—all that can happen to me is that I go through one more unregulated transformation."

"All?" Sirius shouted, pushing his wild hair out of his eyes. "Unregulated? I've *been* there with you, Moony—don't pretend to me that you don't care if that happens. And just where do you plan on being restrained?"

"The shed."

Sirius looked sick. "This is unbelievable stupidity," he breathed. "I never thought you'd be willing to risk not only your life, but your peace of mind—and *mine*—in order to boost some little girl's self-esteem."

"I'm *not* a little girl!"

Over Sirius's head, Remus saw Ginny enter from the hallway. She stood several feet from Sirius, her eyes flashing, but her posture straight. She seemed very tall to Remus.

"And you're not an adult," said Sirius, straightening as well. "You've not even had your seventh year at school and besides, adults don't go eavesdropping and listening in—"

"I was going to close the door! Besides, you were shouting. I could hear you on the stairs."

Sirius crossed his arms, and, using what Remus considered a very patronizing tone of voice, asked, "Where do you plan on getting all of the ingredients? I know the recipe by heart, some of those things—"

Ginny interrupted Sirius again. "Harry helped me," she said shortly. She seemed totally unwilling to justify herself any further, and Remus was glad to see it.

"Oh, well, if *Harry's* helping you with a potion, I'm *sure* it will work. He received such excellent marks in that class," Sirius snarled, slamming his fist on the desk. "Do you have any idea what happens if you don't make this potion correctly? Do you have *any* idea what it's like to turn into a werewolf against your will?"

"Do you?" Ginny shot back.

Remus cleared his throat. Ginny and Sirius both turned their attention to him, and he spoke in a clear, steady voice. "I hope neither of you ever discover what that feels like." He glared at Sirius, who still appeared to be livid, and Ginny, who looked hurt and angry, then walked over to the door and gestured through it. "Ginny, if you're starting the potion in the morning, then I want you to get some sleep. You can start in here as early as you want."

She nodded, and turned to go. But as she stepped into the hallway, Sirius took three long strides to reach her, holding *Calming the Wolf: Development of the Wolfsbane Potion* in his hand. "Here," he said, shoving it out to her. "It might be *educational* to read this."

Ginny looked, for a moment, like she might say something horrible. But instead, with the grace and dignity of another redhead that Remus remembered well, Ginny accepted the book from Sirius, thanked him, and left.

This time, Remus made sure to close the door all the way. He locked it with his wand and slowly turned around to continue his discussion with Sirius, who had sunk into the armchair, arms crossed.

"Do you honestly plan to carry out this experiment?" he asked in a tone that made Remus feel for anyone who might be up against Sirius in the courtroom.

"Yes. I'm not endangering anyone. I know the shed's strong enough to hold me, should anything—unexpected—happen."

Sirius laughed shortly. "Unexpected..." he muttered to himself, then looked up at Remus darkly. "What explanation does she have?" he asked. "Why is she suddenly so interested in something so far over her head?"

Remus said nothing. There was no solid answer.

Sirius waited for a moment. When no reply came, he let out something between a sigh and a growl, and said firmly, "Fine, be an idiot. But Padfoot will be joining you. And don't try telling me no."

Remus felt a rush of the same warm gratitude he'd got at age eleven, when Sirius had come down from an Astronomy lesson in a rage of discovery, flanked by James and Peter, demanding the truth about Remus's monthly sickness. Remus had been prone, in bed, recovering from that month's transformation. After a long and unrelenting interrogation by all three of them, he'd confessed the truth, then rolled over and buried his face in the pillow, dangerously near tears, certain that none of them would speak to him ever again. Never had he been so mistaken—they'd responded with support and protection, rather than fear, and curiosity, rather than revulsion. They'd become his whole life.

And Sirius was all he had left.

Remus looked down at the mop of black hair that meant more to him than he could put into words. Sirius was a good man, if a haunted one, but he was very young still, in many ways. He'd been almost twenty-four when they'd thrown him into Azkaban, and now, at almost forty, he was still as sullen, stubborn, difficult, and moody as he had been in his youth. But he always had Remus's best interests in mind. Remus knew it. And Moony wanted Padfoot with him during the transformation so badly that he found himself almost looking forward to the full moon.

However, wanting it badly didn't make it possible. Remus shook his head slowly, hating the words he had to say. "You can't be in there. If things go wrong, it's too small a space. If I have a... violent night..." He stopped. "If I hurt you, I'd never forgive myself."

Sirius looked up at him with weary eyes, then held up one hand and began ticking off the facts with his fingers.

"So. You *are* going to do this whether or not I think it's a good idea. You *aren't* going to let me be in that shed with you. You *do* want me to just hang around outside and listen to you whining, and howling, and throwing yourself up against the walls, and clawing at steel, and ripping holes in yourself all night long—"

"Or," interrupted Remus, trying not to fear exactly the things that Sirius was mercilessly detailing, "you may hear nothing. We don't know that the potion won't work."

Sirius snorted.

"I mean it," Remus insisted. "She's very well prepared and I think—well, we just don't know what will happen."

But Sirius didn't seem to care. "Don't do this," he pled. "This is willingly putting yourself in danger. This is ludicrous."

"Ludicrous like you, spending two weeks at Azkaban, rounding up prisoners and getting close to Dementors?" Remus leveled at once, with quiet precision.

"Not the same thing," Sirius protested automatically.

"Why not? You did something you felt you needed to do, regardless of the pain, and I need to do the same thing. It's a risk, but I need to take it."

Sirius looked at him moodily. "Why?" he asked, flatly.

"Because I haven't taken a good one in a long time," Remus answered, realizing as he said it, that it was true. "I spent twelve years of my life hating myself, trying to hate you, regretting ... " He pulled a chair over to where Sirius was sitting, sat down himself, and leaned forward. "Twelve years is a long time. Unlike you, I had a choice. I could have returned to England and kept an eye on Harry. I could have given Dumbledore potentially helpful information. There were many things that I *could* have done, but I didn't do them, because I was sick of taking risks and losing everything."

"Fine, Moony. There are lots of things that you can go do now. Plenty of risks you can take that don't involve *this*," Sirius said, motioning up towards the ceiling, above which the girls' room was located.

"I *want* to do this. For me, it is worth one restless night if I at least let Ginny give it a go. She's not going to kill me. And if it works... well, think about it. I won't have to leave every month, and Padfoot can be with me every time. In any case, *you're* the one who always used to go on and on about how I needed to be more adventurous, remember?" Remus reached out and punched Sirius's leg lightly.

Sirius gave a sort of half-laugh, but it didn't diminish the concern in his eyes. "I'm still not thrilled about this," he muttered.

Remus nodded. They weren't going to agree, but the argument had come to a close, and he was relieved. He glanced at the case files on the desk, and at Sirius's overstuffed briefcase that was

still on the floor, hoping that perhaps now, he could successfully turn the subject to other matters. "Would you like my help?" he asked, pointing to the files.

Sirius shrugged. "You don't have to help," he answered, rubbing his eyes.

Those words indicated more clearly than anything else that Sirius was exhausted. Normally he would have refused help entirely, but he was too tired to make pretenses of self-sufficiency.

"I know I don't," Remus returned, getting up and grabbing the briefcase. "But then, I'm generous."

Sirius opened one eye. "Right," he scoffed. "So generous that you're trying to give me a heart attack—" But he stopped, when Remus gave him a warning look, and handed him a stack of files.

"You take these and I'll take the others."

Sirius accepted the files with a nod and opened the first one in his lap, pulling his wand to Summon a quill. Remus did the same thing. Moments later, they were both engrossed in the lives and transgressions of imprisoned, alleged Dark wizards, making notes on the material just as if they were back at Hogwarts, doing their homework. And, just as they had often done in school, the two worked side by side, well into the night, stopping every so often to complain to each other and eat something.

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Bill Weasley had expected his father's office to be a bit more crowded. He checked his watch, saw that he was five minutes early, and settled himself in the chair next to Alastor Moody's, rubbing absently at his temple with two fingers.

"Bill," Moody greeted him, gruffly. "Goblins still giving you a headache?"

"No, no," Bill said lightly. "I don't mind being knocked down, sat on, and interrogated six times a day. Getting to like it, actually."

"You get that from me," said Arthur, looking up from a stack of papers and grinning. "That's exactly why I married your mother."

There was a rap at the door, and a security officer entered. "Sirius Black," he announced.

"That's fine, Lawrence," Arthur said. "He's always cleared."

"I *have* identification," came Sirius's irritated voice, from beyond the door. "Get out of the way."

"He's just doing his job," said a woman's brisk voice, also outside the door. "Here's my ID, Lawrence. Secretary Privy to Magical Matters, Rose K. Brown."

"Let her in," Arthur called. "And you can let Charlie and Mick right in, when they get here—no announcement necessary. We're going to get this one started on time."

"Yes sir." Lawrence shut the door.

Sirius glared at the door, for a moment, before dropping into a seat beside Bill's.

Rose K. Brown, on the other hand, smiled at all of them from beneath a neat sweep of wavy blonde hair. She sat easily next to Arthur's desk and adjusted her ID tags and Ministry pin, before opening her tidy-looking briefcase. "We're missing someone?" she asked shortly, looking at her watch.

Bill fought back a sigh. Rose had been a Slytherin prefect, in Charlie's class, the same year that Bill had been Head Boy, and she'd eventually become Hogwarts' Head Girl. She'd been famous as the only trustworthy Slytherin, for though she was as ambitious as any of them, she always played fair. As a result, she'd had good friends in every house, and she'd even frequented the Gryffindor table without fielding any protest. Partly, perhaps, because she looked so deceptively sweet—she had a translucent face, dreamy blue eyes and a soft, feminine voice. But everyone who'd ever crossed her knew better. Rose was such a stickler for rules and regulations that she'd got Bill himself into detention-sized trouble, not once, but four times, during the course of his time at Hogwarts.

"We're missing my son Charlie and his associate," Arthur replied calmly. "But there's plenty to discuss, so let's get start—"

"They're *late*?" Rose clicked her tongue. "And this business with dragons was your son's idea, is that correct?"

Arthur got the patient look on his face that Bill had not seen since long ago dinners with Percy, as he turned to Rose. "Yes, that's correct. Why don't you start us off with your concerns about this business, while we wait?"

"The Council's concerns are with the dragons themselves," Rose countered. "I expected an expert on the subject to be present for this briefing."

"Look, they'll *be* here," Bill said tightly. "Let's get started."

"I wasn't aware you'd become an employee of the Ministry, Bill," Rose returned, her voice smooth as cream. "And, as a matter of fact, I wonder at this information not being classified, Arthur. It's no

offense to your son, of course, but do you really think it's wise—"

"He's a member of the Order," growled Moody, as though this should outrank any Ministry official by a mile. Bill glanced at him appreciatively. It was the great honor of his life, being inducted into the Order of the Phoenix, and he felt the same way that Moody did—Ministry employees or not, they were all working toward rebuilding the wizarding world, and he would offer whatever help he could.

"Bill's here because he's got training in curse breaking and finances that we need, at the moment." Arthur shrugged at Rose. "I agree it would be helpful if we had a full staff, but as we don't, maybe we can make use of Bill, as our Gringotts Liaison."

Rose looked at Bill doubtfully, but nodded. "For now, I suppose that's fine." She withdrew a clipboard from her briefcase and scanned down a parchment list, with her quill. "Here's a question unrelated to the physical problems posed by dragons. Regardless of what we decide on that score, shall we create an office specifically dedicated to handling the containment of the Dementors? The Council proposes a PAP—Permanent Azkaban Patrol division, to be separately staffed and funded. Thoughts?"

"Permanent?" Sirius leaned forward on his knees. "Don't you mean semi-permanent? We're not going to have to patrol the Dementors forever."

Bill held in a sigh. Sirius was dead set on the total destruction of the Dementors, not just the control of them, and though Bill had to admit he agreed with that plan of attack, he didn't see a way to make it possible. "I've done a lot of work with complex curses and spells that ward off Immortals—like the Sphinxes over in Egypt," he began slowly, "and from what Moody tells me, the Dementors are resistant to magical attacks. We haven't even come across a curse that does minimal damage. They seem to be unclassified Immortals, or at least to have some kind of natural armor against death."

Sirius's jaw clenched. "Then we'll just have to try something else. It's unacceptable that those... *things*," he spat out the word, "are alive and capable of Kissing. They were the servants of Voldemort, just like the Death Eaters, and Azkaban isn't a punishment for them. They need to die."

Bill exchanged a glance with his father, who nodded. "I agree with that," Arthur said, adjusting his glasses and running a hand over his high, bald forehead. "But if we can get a grip on these dragons, I think it's as good a solution as we have, for now. If you'd rather, we can consider it a *semi*-permanent solution."

"No, Arthur, that's not good enough. You know we need to destroy those things entirely—that *must* be a high priority."

Before anyone else could answer Sirius, Rose spoke up. "Mr. Black is quite right. The costs of keeping dragons for an extended period of time are incredibly high and will be a very heavy tax on Ministry resources. The Council believes that we should find another way to contain the Dementors, until they can be eradicated."

"Eradicated how?" Bill asked, trying not to let his annoyance creep into his voice. "I just told you—"

"That it hasn't been done does not mean that it *can't* be done," Sirius barked, his eyes darkening. "Spells can be built. New curses can be created. It's our duty to make that happen."

Bill didn't answer. There was no point in fighting about Dementors with a man who had been imprisoned by them for twelve years. Sirius Black had personal issues at stake in this argument that no one in the office could fully comprehend, and everyone seemed to feel it, because they all remained quiet for a moment and allowed him to regain his composure.

"I propose," said Rose quietly, in the silence, "that we therefore establish two departments. I'd like to maintain that the PAP is a good idea, for now. However, I do suggest a second new division in the Ministry, which would be responsible for researching the extermination of Dementors. Thoughts?"

"I'll head it up," Sirius said at once. "Let's get that started."

"Black." Moody turned in his chair and his peg leg scraped the floor. He fixed both eyes on Sirius, and in his gnarled old face there was something like exasperation. "You're mad. You're prosecuting a third of the wizarding community, you've got eighty percent of those Stunned Dark wizards still to research, trials start in a week, you're trying to stand in on meetings about Azkaban, and you want to head up another department, do you?"

"Yes." Sirius didn't bat an eye.

Neither did Arthur. "No," he said, very firmly. "Rose has certainly given us something to sink our teeth into, and I'd like to look into creating a team responsible for that sort of research, but Sirius, I need you dealing with Culparrat, and that's the end of it."

"But, Arthur—"

"The end, as in, conversation over." Arthur looked at Rose. "Excellent proposal. You take that back to the Council. I want to hear what they have to say about a division like that, before we plan and implement it."

"Yes, sir."

It was the best that they could do, at present, and Bill knew that Sirius was well aware of it. Still, Sirius looked unhappy as he sank back into his chair, as if he didn't trust anyone other than himself to be fully dedicated to the destruction of the Dementors. There were bags under his eyes that made him look old and tired, and lines around his mouth that betrayed his anxiety. He looked even worse than usual, and Bill found himself guessing that perhaps Azkaban wasn't the only thing troubling Sirius. He wondered if the man would have time for a butterbeer after this meeting—he seemed like he could use it.

"And that concludes all business," Rose said, her tone growing disapproving, again, "that is unrelated to dragons. I certainly hope we won't have to schedule another meeting—"

There was a muffled laugh outside the door, which came open a few inches.

"What, no formal announcement?" came a familiar voice. The speaker was pretending to be outraged. "C'mon, Lawrence, give us the red carpet treatment."

Bill held in a laugh, watching Rose purse her lips at the sound of Charlie's raucous approach. His brother wasn't irresponsible, he was merely challenged when it came to time—and he was late with such perfect consistency that it actually *was* responsible, in a warped sort of way. Or so Charlie had used to explain it to their mother. Bill grinned at his father, whose eyes were twinkling.

"We deserve it," came another voice, which was clearly Mick's. "We've just been toasted by a dragon, the both of us. We're heroes!"

"The Minister asked me to show you in without announcements," said Lawrence, unmoved. "You're late. Go on."

"You're no fun," Charlie complained, and pushed the door open. He came into the Minister's office, followed by Mick, and Lawrence shut the door after them, looking quite fed up.

"How nice of you to join us, Mr. Weasley," said Rose, too-sweetly, checking her watch. "Perhaps you and your assistant could sit down and we could all discuss the business at hand."

"At your service, Miss Rosie," said Mick, winking suggestively, as he and Charlie took the seats closest to her, both nursing impressive looking burns with enormous swatches of sterile padding.

For a moment, Bill thought that Mick might be getting himself into trouble for harassing the Secretary Privy. But Rose only looked at him as if he were a very small child, then glanced at Charlie. "I don't believe I know your assistant, Mr. Weasley."

"He's not my assistant, he's my associate, and sure you do," said Charlie, smiling at her as if he hadn't noticed the condescending tone in her voice. "He was in our year. Gryffindor. This is Mick O'Malley."

Bill had a very hard time not laughing out loud at the expression of shock in Rose's eyes. She did a bang up job of not betraying too much of her surprise, but Bill knew that she had to be feeling it. Mick had been a skinny little class clown at Hogwarts.

But he'd certainly bloomed, if late, and several years of dragon keeping had entirely changed his stature.

"Of course," Rose said evenly. "It's been a long time, Mr. O'Malley." She redoubled her focus on her clipboard, tapping her quill, and Bill made a mental note to include Sirius and Moody in the joke, later on.

"Right," said Arthur, "let's move this along. Bring me up to date on the dragon situation, then we'll hear the Council's concerns, and then we'll have to make a decision. Moody, you first."

Moody cleared his throat. "Simple enough. Hardly have enough Aurors to track down any escaped Death Eaters. Can't be wasting our trainees out on that island, doing Patronus Spells all day and night. They need to be learning other things, and they're tired. Not to mention that the Dementors are getting more difficult to control."

"Why?" Sirius demanded. "What do you mean?"

Moody gave a growling laugh. "Well, I'm no great theorist, but it seems to me that the more we use the Patronus, the more resistant the Dementors are to it."

"They're desensitized," Bill muttered. "Yeah, that's a definite possibility, I've seen that with other creatures—too much of the same curse and they're suddenly immune."

"That's right. It's dangerous for my men and women, and it's dangerous for people on the mainland, if those things stop responding to the Patronus. We don't have another defense."

"That all makes sense," Rose said, nodding, "but I'd like to know why dragons are the next best choice."

"Well, I'll tell you." Charlie settled into his chair and smacked his hands on the leather arms as if preparing to give a highly desirable lecture. Which, Bill groaned inwardly, he probably was. "Dragons produce a natural energy that radiates out around them, creating a force field. It's a lot like the energy of a Patronus—really joyful and all—only even more powerful. So we brought one of our trained flight-dragons over from Romania, to see if it'd stave off the Dementors."

"I rode it out there," Mick continued, "and sure enough, Dementors can't get within about fifty yards of it before they shoot straight back onto the island." He grinned. "That's the same power as you get with three trained wizards, out there. You've got what, eight Auror trainees around that island at all times?"

Moody nodded. "Two teams—day and night shifts— and two trainees on standby, for emergencies."

"And you're saying that just *three* dragon riders would get the same thing accomplished," Rose mused, looking at her list.

"Three's the best bet," Mick agreed. "We could do it with two, but it'd leave too big a pocket for Dementors to slip through."

Rose glanced at Arthur. "Well, in terms of pure budget, I can't complain about that. We'd be cutting down from eighteen employees to nine."

"Six," said Mick and Charlie, at the same time.

"Nine," Rose repeated. "Three by day, three by night, three on standby."

Charlie rolled his eyes and put on his best professional demeanor. "Privy Brown, do you really expect all three of the riders to get sick at the same time?"

"Mr. Weasley, if for some reason they *do*, would you like to be held responsible for the damage that unleashed Dementors will cause?"

Sirius sat up straight. "She's right. Hire nine riders."

"And we'll want nine dragons as well," Charlie said. "Three for each shift, and three in case something happens to the others."

"What can happen to a dragon?" asked Rose, seeming far less concerned about the prospect of three enormous beasts all getting ill at once.

Charlie looked a bit affronted. "Lots," he informed her. "Pregnancy, sickness, you never know. We don't like to fly them unless they're in peak condition; they're only partly tamed. They'll kill you if they're in a foul mood." He grinned. "Next question?"

"Do you have nine trained flight dragons?"

"Yeah," Mick replied. "We had about twenty trained for the war, all Common Welsh, so we'll bring out eight to add to the one we've been testing with."

"Fine. We won't have to salary them, but I imagine the keeping costs are going to be rather large?" She looked at Charlie, as if hoping he'd say no.

"We're going to need to build a typical dragon enclosure, on the mainland," Charlie answered. "Staffed like the one in Romania—but smaller. Nine dragons, thirty keepers."

"Thirty!"

"That's keeping it minimal," Charlie laughed. "Sorry to blow up your budget."

Rose shook her head, looking as though she might be about to wail. "Oh, this is so far out of our reach, Arthur, we can't afford to do this. And the Council is going to have fits when they find out you've allotted more money to the control of Dementors than you have to the relief of those poor war orphans—"

"Ask the Council," Moody said dryly, "how they'd like to be Kissed."

"Tell the Council," Arthur corrected quickly, "that social relief is only a second monetary priority because the Dementors pose a physical danger to all of us. Including those orphans." His voice was very grave, his eyes were very tired, and Bill felt a rush of pride. His father wasn't just a convenient stand in for an absent Minister. No matter his protestations, Arthur Weasley *was* the Minister of Magic, and he was overseeing their world with the honest, even hand of a man who'd raised seven children.

"Where are we going to *put* this enclosure?" Rose asked, looking nearly as tired as Arthur, and sounding a bit desperate. "Right across from Azkaban? How big will it be? And how will we keep Muggles from wandering through it and getting torched?"

Mick guffawed. "Torched!" he repeated, admiringly. "That's the spirit!"

She glared at him. "How are we going to keep *any* of this secret?" she demanded. "Three dragons, flying about in the middle of the day, in an area that you very well know is frequently crossed by Muggle ships and airplanes—and this is our best solution?"

"I think it's been shown," said Sirius, wearily, "that it's our only solution."

"We'll do Muggle-Repelling Charms, on the mainland," Moody said. "Plenty good enough; worked

for Hogwarts for a thousand years, hasn't it?"

"And over the sea?" Rose insisted. "In the air?"

Everyone thought quietly, for a moment.

"Got it!" Charlie exclaimed, after a moment. "There was a witch who put up these massive Diversion Enchantments, during the war—kept the dragons totally invisible from everybody. Wizards included. Isn't that right, *Bill*." Charlie threw him a very cheeky grin. "How about we hire *her*?"

Bill felt a jolt in his nervous system, and worked hard not to show it. Charlie was giving him a perfect opportunity—this was a totally innocent way to find Fleur, get her to England, and see her again. It was something he rarely allowed himself to think about, but, presented with the option, he realized suddenly that he *wanted* to see her again. For a wild moment, Bill considered opening his mouth and telling his father to hire her right away.

But he wouldn't give into it. She was just a veela. That was why he couldn't quite get her face out of his head. Bill beat the thought of bringing her to Diagon Alley out of the front of his brain, and struggled to stay in control.

Without changing his expression or his tone of voice, he ignored Charlie's insinuation and addressed Rose. "Diversion Enchantments are your best bet," he agreed. "But it'd be far too expensive to bring up a specialist to Diagon Alley. I wouldn't suggest hiring outside."

"Is there someone in the area with the necessary expertise?" Rose asked.

"No," Bill answered. "But there will be, at the beginning of September. Gringotts has hired a professional charmer to come and restructure a lot of the wards that the Death Eaters blasted apart, inside the bank itself."

"Perfect." Rose jotted something on her parchment. "He's already coming out here, and we won't have to pay travel expenses or boarding. Excellent idea, thanks for thinking of the budget."

Bill nodded sincerely, though the budget had played no part whatsoever in his suggestion.

"The Council has one last question," Rose announced. "Who is going to fly the dragons?"

Mick immediately raised his hand, as did Charlie.

Rose surveyed them. "Who in their right minds?" she corrected.

Bill permitted himself a snort of laughter. He had to agree with Rose on that one.

Charlie waved her off. "Plenty of people. You've got two right here, and then my assistant's an excellent flier—using dragons was her idea, in the first place. I know she's anxious to get back to England anyway, so we can count on—"

Seeing his revenge, Bill shot Charlie a meaningful look. "Anxious to get back to *England*, is she?" he inquired innocently.

Charlie glared at him. "Anyhow, that's three of us," he finished, his neck a bit pink. "And we'll draft up a letter of invitation to the other dragon riders who were with us during the war. I'm sure we can find six others by the beginning of September, if that's when we're getting the Enchantments up, and starting this."

To Bill's surprise, Rose looked semi-satisfied with the data she'd collected, though she didn't say so. "I'm not looking forward to hearing what the press has to say about this," she muttered. "They'll blow the dangers of dragon riding out of proportion."

Mick turned on her, looking incredulous. "You can't blow the dangers of dragon riding out of proportion," he laughed. "We're going to be riding meat-eating beasts and fighting off soul-sucking ones."

"You say that to the *Daily Prophet*," Rose said, replacing her clipboard in her briefcase and clicking it shut, "and most of the danger you'll face will come from me. Gentlemen, if you've presented all your materials?"

Arthur nodded. "We're finished. Meeting adjourned."

"A word, Arthur?" Rose said at once. "I have one or two things that require private discussion."

"Fine, fine." Arthur rubbed his bald spot again. "Boys, will I see you home? Your mother wants you to come for dinner."

Bill and Charlie promised to be there, and everyone left Rose and Arthur alone to continue their meeting.

Immediately after they'd left the office, Moody pulled Sirius across the corridor and began speaking to him in hushed tones. Bill stayed close and kept an eye on Sirius—he didn't want him leaving before he could ask him to go for a drink—and Charlie and Mick hung back, as well.

"That was stupid, Bill," Charlie cheerfully informed him. "Could've had your old girlfriend stop by for a few weeks, and you would've been fine. That Love Charm Repellant I put on you is still in effect. You could have toyed with *her* a bit, this time." He wagged his eyebrows, and Mick looked amused.

Bill gave Charlie a withering look. He didn't want to talk about Fleur with anyone, he wasn't thrilled that Mick apparently knew about the events that had transpired, and he didn't need teasing about something that still made him feel terribly foolish. "Why don't you concentrate on your own damn girlfriend," he shot, his voice low and clipped.

Charlie's smile evaporated. "I don't *have* one," he fumed, "I keep telling you—"

Mick interrupted at once. "Hey, speaking of women— Privy Brown's got right sexy since school let out, hasn't she?"

Bill and Charlie left off sniping at each other, to stare at Mick, for a moment.

"She hates you," Charlie finally said, matter-of-factly.

"Yeah," Mick said, looking totally unperturbed. "She made that overly clear, did Miss Rosie. I need to get her to a pub." He grinned and ran a hand through his brown hair, giving Bill a good view of the nasty burn on the back of his forearm.

"Medical wing," Bill said, on reflex. "Both of you," he added, looking at the large, blood-spotted bandage that Charlie had wrapped around his bicep.

"Never got over being Head Boy, did you?" Charlie laughed.

"If Mum sees that burn, she'll drive us all mad during dinner, chatting on about how you need to find a safer line of work now that the war's over. Go get it mended."

Charlie nodded, and gave Bill an oddly sad half-smile. "Percy'd appreciate you stepping in for him," he joked, then ducked his head and went quickly away down the corridor, with Mick.

Bill felt a painful tug in his chest, but he put it aside as best he could—Sirius had pulled his wand and was clearly about to Disapparate.

"Hold on—" Bill crossed to Sirius with one long step. "I'm hitting the Leaky Cauldron, and you could use a drink."

It took a few minutes to persuade Sirius to give up working, for the moment, but Bill managed it. Moments later, they were walking through Diagon Alley, quizzing each other on their respective projects.

"And the curses on the lower vaults?" Sirius was asking.

"Torn up. When the bank got blasted, one of the security dragons down in the lower part of the vault system got free of its restraints. Knocked out a whole section of walls, not to mention setting off a domino effect of nasty curses. It's a free-for-all, down there."

"We're lucky it hasn't been looted."

"True. Then again, I think you've got most of the advantage-takers Stunned, over at Culparrat. You'll start trying their crimes in what, a week?"

"The week after the full moon." Sirius winced, and rubbed the bridge of his nose, between his eyes. "Arthur's helped me assemble a jury, and a roster of acceptable judges and defense representatives, so at least we've got them taken care of."

"But who's giving you a hand with prosecution?" asked Bill, curiously.

"No one."

Bill raised a startled eyebrow. Moody was right—Sirius was mad, taking that much on, without assistance. But Bill didn't protest it, because he thought he understood Sirius's reasons. Despite the new peace in the wizarding world, people still weren't entirely sure who could be trusted. As a result, the remaining living core members of the Order of the Phoenix were taking on the bulk of the work, in every field. And though they were all going to stay very tired, for a long time, at least they'd know that things were getting done right.

"Hey, c'n I have a knut?"

Sirius and Bill turned, together, to see a very young boy with sandy brown hair, standing off to the side of the cobbled road. He looked to be about twelve, and his eyes were very fierce. He held out a grubby hand for money.

"God," Sirius muttered, and took a step toward the boy, who jumped back.

"Stay off," he said warningly. "D'you have change, or not?"

"You need more than a knut," Sirius told him, his voice going hoarse. "Let me get you to St. Mungo's—"

"You can *sod off*!" the boy yelled. He turned and fled away, disappearing so quickly that Sirius didn't even have a chance to start after him.

"I've seen that kid," Bill said quietly. "I've tried to take him in, as well. It's the same thing with a couple of the others. They'll fight me off and starve, rather than go to the children's home."

"Of course they will." Sirius looked even more drawn and fatigued than he had before as they entered the Leaky Cauldron and sat heavily on bar stools. "They want their parents, not an institution. You know what I see every time I look at one of those kids?"

Bill shook his head.

"Harry," Sirius answered flatly. "I see Harry. Hey, Tom, can I get a bottle of Madman and a—" He looked at Bill.

"The same."

"Sure thing, Mr. Weasley." Tom paused, and gulped. "And Mr. Black." He opened two bottles of the strongest stout on the market, and handed them across the bar to the two men. Bill noticed that Tom retracted his hand from Sirius's bottle in an excessive hurry. He further noticed that Sirius flinched at the bartender's obvious fear. He made no comment on this, however. There was nothing to say. Sirius Black had been a wanted man for sixteen years, before his Ministry pardon, and people still reacted to him as if he were really a murderer.

Sirius downed the Madman as if it were water, and asked for another. Tom sent it flying toward him from the other end of the bar. Sirius caught it, and sighed. "Can't say I blame him for standing back," he muttered, putting the bottle to his lips.

But though Sirius's meaning was obvious, the flying bottle of stout put Bill in mind of a less difficult topic. "How's Ron doing, down at the pub?" he asked. "I still haven't made it down there."

"You should go. He's a good bartender. Nice, heavy hand with the Liquid Curse."

Bill grinned. "Is that so." He could hardly imagine Ron, all grown up and working a job. But then, it was hard to convince himself that Ron and Ginny weren't still very, very young. Though he'd seen proof of their age, during the war, he still had an urge to pick up Ginny and toss her around, every time he saw her. They were just kids.

"They're not driving you mad?" he asked Sirius, laughing.

Sirius finished the Madman and exhaled loudly, then asked for a shot of Liquid Curse. "This is it, for me," he told Bill. "Cut me off, I've got work to do. And no, they're not driving me mad. Unless you count the fact that Harry has a nobility complex worse than his late father's. Other than dealing with that, it's been a treat."

Bill knew the story behind that comment; Charlie had told him all about Harry's encounter with the Dementor. "So none of the trouble's coming from the Weasley end? Shocker. Write to my mum, will you, and tell her she did well with the last two—she'll feed you for the rest of your life." Bill finished his stout, and asked for another one as well.

"Ron's fine. Reminds me of me," Sirius answered, with a harsh laugh. "And I don't mean that as an insult." He lifted his shot glass, and drank half its generous contents.

"I don't think he'd take it as one," Bill replied, wiping his mouth. "Glad to hear they're not running you ragged—I thought they might be up to no good, what with those things Harry asked me to send him."

Sirius looked up sharply. "What did he ask you to send him?"

Bill shrugged and drank, before answering. "Potion ingredients. Said he was working on something important and needed some god awful stuff from Knockturn Alley—shredded flesh and Rune-spoor scales and something else."

Sirius was on the edge of his seat, and his eyes were blazing. "Did you send it to him?" he demanded. "If you haven't, then *don't*."

Bill moved back, surprised. "Sorry, but I sent it yesterday, and it got there fine. Had an owl from Harry this morning."

Sirius made a furious noise, drank the end of his shot, and slammed the glass on the bar. Tom shot a nervous look at the two of them, but didn't come to ask what the matter was. "You have," Sirius said angrily, "a very presumptuous little sister."

"What—Ginny?" Bill narrowed his eyes, instantly worried. "What's it got to do with Ginny?" He set down his bottle and pushed back his stool, turning to face Sirius.

But Sirius seemed to realize he'd made a mistake. "Never mind," he muttered. "One too many—" He gestured to his glass. "Never mind."

"I'd like to know what's going on," Bill leveled, in the steely tone that he usually reserved for dealing with extremely difficult goblins.

"I can't..." Sirius rubbed the bridge of his nose, wincing again. "You know what the Wolfsbane Potion is."

"I do." Bill watched, and waited.

"Your sister's asked Remus for permission to make it, this month." Sirius laughed incredulously. "And *this* is what she meant, when she said that Harry was helping her. Damn it—"

"Wait." Bill couldn't quite process what he was hearing. "Are you telling me that Ginny's planning to make a Wolfsbane Potion out of those ingredients I sent?"

"Among others." Sirius shook his head. "Bill, this is very personal and I had no intention of

blurting it out. You're going to have to keep this to yourself."

"But Remus isn't *allowing* her to—"

"Oh, but he is." Sirius gave a wide, false smile. "He certainly is. She started this morning, I believe."

Bill's heart raced. Ginny wasn't old enough, or educated enough, to successfully manage a potion that advanced. He was also fairly certain that it was illegal for her even to attempt it. "Isn't it..." he paused. "It's lethal, Sirius, if she gets it wrong."

Sirius laughed—the sort of laugh Bill had always imagined, as a child, when people had told stories of Sirius Black, standing in the middle of the street surrounded by dead Muggles, laughing maniacally. He shivered.

There was a sudden, shattering noise. Bill looked up and saw that, at the far end of the bar, Tom was trembling. He'd dropped a glass at his feet.

Sirius looked at the old bartender, seeming to grow sober before Bill's eyes. "Let's go," he said quietly, putting money on the bar, and pushing back his stool. He was out the door in moments and, when they were in the street once more, he turned to Bill. "I want you to keep this to yourself."

"If Remus is injured, Ginny will be held responsible. I can't let that—"

"I won't let that happen," Sirius interrupted. "I'll talk him out of it by the end of the week, before he starts taking doses. But it's a private issue, and I don't want your family worried for no reason."

Bill nodded, slowly. He couldn't imagine what his mother would do, if she got wind of anything like this. "You'll get in touch with me, if anything—"

"Nothing will happen." Sirius pulled his wand. "Got to get home and work. Thanks for the drink."

"You paid for the—" Bill began, but he didn't bother finishing.

Sirius had already Disapparated.

A/N: The Secretary Privy to Magical Matters and the Council of Magical Matters are straight from the imagination of Hallie, the Sugar Quill's Head Girl and advisor on all things Parliamentary. Thank you! This chapter is dedicated to B Bennett, who likes to worry, but is usually right. We love her for it...

— CHAPTER THIRTEEN —

The Wolfsbane Potion

Standing in his bedroom window, Sirius stared down into the back garden of Lupin Lodge, turning a roll of parchment over and over, in his hands. Remus was in the garden, working steadily in the dirt, hunched over a patch of small, green shoots. The pale light of the overcast sun glinted on his greying hair, which fell in his eyes as he pulled up weeds and smoothed down soil. He settled back on his knees eventually, and surveyed his work with a peaceful smile, as if nothing was awry in the world. He looked perfectly content and free from fear.

It made Sirius sick.

Tonight, a full moon would rise, and Remus would be subject to it, as he always was—only this time it would be worse. Sirius couldn't even begin to calculate how much worse. Remus might transform fully, in that tiny little shed, and if he did, there was no telling what he'd do to himself. At least when he'd been a child in the Shrieking Shack, there had been rooms to tear up and furniture to smash. Sirius looked from Remus's bowed head to the slanted metal structure in the corner of the garden, studying its locks and bolts. Remus hadn't been forced to transform there since his schooldays. He was a grown man now. He'd tear himself apart.

But he was really going to do this. Sirius clenched his teeth in anger. Remus was supposed to be the thoughtful one. Studious and quiet. Precautionary. Or so everyone at Hogwarts had assumed, anyway—it had been impossible not to trust his soft, flecked eyes, and thin, professorial stature. He had the sort of face that made people want to listen and reflect, and his unassuming self-possession had been an essential element of all successful Marauder operations. Sirius had created loud diversions, James had played innocent, Peter had been legitimately clueless, Lily had scolded—all while Remus had slipped away to do the real damage.

Sirius leaned his forehead on the window and watched Remus now, wishing... everything. Wishing he hadn't ruined their lives, first of all—everything that was terrible resulted directly from his own stupidity, and he would never, ever be free of that. He wished again and again, with an agonizing futility, that he had been the Secret Keeper. Then Lily and James would be alive, and Harry would be with them—then he and Remus wouldn't be a makeshift parenting unit for his godson and his godson's friends—then Ginny wouldn't even *be* here, making a complicated element of their lives even more painful.

Ginny had no idea what this was going to be like. She thought she did—she thought she'd seen everything. Sirius laughed bitterly to himself. He remembered thinking the same thing, at her age. He granted that she *had* seen more, at seventeen, than he had been exposed to, but she was still behaving with teenaged recklessness, as if all things were immortal. She was treating Remus's condition as if it was something to be experimented with. Of course, it was easy for her; she had never seen Remus come back to his human state, bleeding and gasping and sobbing. She had never seen his eyes in the moments before transformation, vacant and full of self-hatred all at once. She had never seen him shake and stumble like a toddler getting his legs, something terribly painful to watch in a fully-grown man.

She'll know tonight. Sirius tried to banish the thought, but he couldn't. He wanted very much to have faith in Ginny's ability; now that the potion had been administered, he hoped nothing more than that it would work. But he simply didn't see how it could, and he wanted to throttle her for going about her business so matter-of-factly, as if she were working toward a given result. She had shown no concern for Remus's well-being, no fear that she might fail. She had been willful and obstinate and very cutting, whenever Sirius had suggested to her that the consequences of this procedure were far greater than she had considered. And seven days ago, despite his protestations and many angry words, she had handed a goblet full of steaming grey liquid to Remus, who had taken it without a murmur.

It was Remus with whom Sirius was most angry. Ginny was acting her age. Remus should have known better. He should have known, at the very least, to take Sirius's concerns into consideration—instead, he had brushed off all fears and concerns with light words and thin smiles. He had spent the past week gardening and marking up case files, saying nothing about the anguish that tonight might bring. Sirius had begged him to think again, before taking the first dose, but Remus had only laughed mildly, in his way, and reminded Sirius that it was his own business what he chose to do about the wolf, and no one else's.

Those words had wounded. Deeply. Sirius had considered the wolf to be his business ever since he had discovered Remus's lycanthropy at age eleven, at which point he had made the study of Animagi his entire extracurricular life. James had helped, of course, but James had Quidditch to think of, and Lily to go after. Peter had assisted as a lackey would: fetching books and jotting down notes. It had been Sirius, studying and thinking and experimenting and failing, who had ultimately conquered the process. It had been Sirius who had transformed, first, into the enormous, bear-like dog who bore the closest responsibility for corralling the wolf. It had also been Sirius who had spent the bulk of his time for twelve miserable years as Padfoot, remembering Moony. Remembering the smell of his animal companion, and whining for him.

But apparently Remus believed that a person who could spend his entire childhood working to protect him and his entire adulthood pining to be with him, should then be capable of turning his back and allowing the wolf to be *his* business. Apparently Remus didn't care if he ripped himself into pieces that Sirius would have to witness. As he had witnessed the last of Lily. And James. And Peter.

Sirius turned away from the window and looked down at the parchment in his hands. He had only one element of control left over the situation, and he would have to use it—he didn't want to bring more pain into this than there already was, but he had promised Bill that he would let him know, if Ginny carried through with the Wolfsbane Potion. In truth he hadn't said another word to Bill—he cursed himself for letting the information slip in the first place. But they would owe the Weasleys some sort of protection for Ginny, from the consequences of Remus's decision. Not that Ginny could be spared the grief, if anything should happen to Remus tonight.

Nor should she be.

Sirius gripped the parchment, steeled himself, and went for the stairs.

* * * * *

Ginny mopped off her forehead and stared into the cauldron, where a thick, grey mixture simmered and foamed. The full moon would rise tonight, and, in several minutes, she would administer the last of the Wolfsbane Potion to Remus.

Haven't killed him yet, she thought grimly, praying that this remaining dose would be as harmless as the others had been. Of course, just because the potion was harmless didn't mean that it was going to work. It was entirely possible that the potion was useless, as well. But she was trying hard not to think about that. Carefully—*very* carefully—she leaned over the cauldron and inserted a stirring rod, which had been specially treated with a charm so that it wouldn't cause any chemical interference. She stirred in wide, counterclockwise circles. Once. Twice. Three times.

"Remove rod," she muttered to herself, pulling it out and wiping it on her robes. "Wait for bubbling to begin."

In seconds, large, wartlike bubbles surfaced in the cauldron and began to pop, splashing her skin. Ginny quickly daubed the potion from her face and arms, and continued muttering.

"Bubbles will settle within three minutes' time, and a foam will rise."

She watched it happen, her heart pounding. It was strange, the way it seemed to be working. She'd never been above average, in Potions class, and she'd never been so invested in the outcome of a bunch of ingredients. Hermione had helped her all week—hovering over her shoulder and offering advice on the proper methods of skinning needleberries and measuring shredded flesh. Of course, this was after she'd got over the shock of what Ginny was proposing to try—her face, when Ginny had confessed her intentions, had been priceless. Hermione had looked positively terrified, yet her eyes had lit with the thrill of a new, academic challenge. She'd put herself to work immediately, boiling the sheep's brain for Ginny, who had admitted she didn't know how.

"When the foam rises, allow it to settle for precisely ninety seconds. Then dip a three-quarter sized, pure-silver ladle into the potion, empty contents into goblet, and serve dose to the werewolf in question."

Ron had got her the ladle. He'd stared at her as though she'd gone mad, of course, when she'd explained what she was doing in the study, on the first day. He told her not to do it—said that she was going to get herself in a lot of trouble, trying something this dangerous. But when Hermione

had run into the study in a panic, to report that they were going to need the ladle in less than an hour and Remus didn't keep any silver Potions tools in the house, it had been Ron who'd sprinted down to the apothecary. He'd spent half his paycheck, securing just the right one, then sprinted back and presented it to Ginny with a dubious look on his face, and a skeptical shake of his head. She hadn't minded. She knew he had faith in her, or he wouldn't have bothered going out of his way.

Ginny checked her watch. "Eighty-eight... eighty-nine..." she poised the ladle, waited a beat, then dipped it into the cauldron with confidence and withdrew a level dose of Wolfsbane Potion. Quickly, she emptied it into Remus's goblet, and observed. "Steam will rise," she said to herself. She had memorized every step of this process. It had become almost natural. "It should smell slightly of rot."

"And it does," said a warm voice, at her back.

Harry. She'd forgot that it was Saturday and he wasn't at practice. Ginny turned around, goblet in hand, to see him looking at her with open admiration. It was the way he'd been looking at her all week. She still couldn't handle it.

"Would you mind letting Remus know it's done?" she asked him quickly. "I think he's in the garden, and I want him to take it right away, but I don't want to leave it alone. Just to be safe."

"Sure." He smiled, making Ginny's heart kick, before he left the study. Harry had been... rather at her service, these past two weeks. He'd managed to get in touch with Bill, yet not give away her secret. He had refused to let her pay him back for the things that had been delivered. He'd checked in with her first thing, after every Quidditch practice, and he'd actually sat with her in the study last night, when she'd been unwilling to leave the cauldron and visit the pub with the rest of them. He'd even let her vent her fears, a little. He hadn't answered—just listened—and she had found herself telling him things she'd never imagined telling Harry. Things about being the youngest and being treated like a child. Things about wanting to be trusted, yet knowing that if the potion failed, she would lose everyone's trust. Harry hadn't laughed once.

"What are you doing with that?"

Ginny turned to the door so fast that she nearly spilled the potion. Sirius stood in the doorway, all in black, mercilessly watching her every move. He looked at the precarious contents of the goblet, and snorted softly with contempt.

"I'm waiting for Remus," she answered shortly, putting the goblet carefully on the desk and moving away from it. She wasn't about to let Sirius ruin everything, at the last minute.

"He hasn't *taken* it?" Sirius crossed his arms and fixed his eyes meaningfully on the clock in the corner of the room.

Ginny stiffened. "Harry is *getting* him," she said loftily. "And I think you're aware that he can take the dose at any time up until three o'clock. But perhaps you think it'll take him two hours to travel inside, from the garden?"

Sirius looked at her coldly. "What a time for jokes. I can see just how seriously you're taking this."

Ginny wanted to retort, but there was nothing to say. He was wrong, and he knew it. She had dedicated herself completely to the success of this potion—she had treated it with all the gravity it deserved—while Sirius had done nothing but needle and provoke her. She'd slept in the study. She'd eaten in the study. She was probably making herself sick, but Sirius didn't care. And Ginny understood that his depreciating treatment of her was motivated by a desperate concern for his best friend, but she hated it and refused to accept it.

"Anything else to say?" she asked briskly, turning back to her cauldron, and polishing off her ladle, taking care not to knock the goblet. She heard Sirius enter the room, and the sound of squeaking leather told her he had taken a seat.

"Several things. I'll say them to you both."

"Fine." Ginny put the ladle down and began polishing the stirring rod. She lay it down beside the other tools, then moved to put out the fire beneath the still-simmering potion.

"And you're just going to leave that ladle out, when he comes in?" asked Sirius, condescendingly.

"It isn't going to hurt him, it's not going anywhere near him, and it's used with this potion for a very specific reason, Sirius," Ginny snapped, turning around. "You *know* that. Silver, to werewolves—"

"I am quite familiar with the details of lycanthropy," he said pointedly, his eyes very unfriendly.

"Yes, that's certainly true." Remus stood in the doorway, with Harry just behind him. His voice was even and his face quite neutral as he looked from Sirius to Ginny. "Ready?" he said to her.

She nodded, grateful that at least one adult in her life had some measure of trust in her. Remus

had never appeared nervous about this experiment for a moment, and that held true now, as he stepped up and took the goblet in his hands. He smelled the steam, and made a face.

"Well, if smell is anything to go by, Ginny, then this is going to work out just fine." He drank the entire contents of the goblet as quickly as he could, with his face screwed up in disgust. "Tastes perfect, too," he said hoarsely, putting the cup down gently on the desk and smiling at Ginny. He dug a peppermint imp out of his pocket and quickly put it in his mouth. "And that ends the worst bit of it, for another month."

Sirius swore, very quietly, under his breath.

Remus faced him. "I'm not worried," he said quietly. "At this point, there's no use in being worried. It either works or it doesn't. I think it will."

Ginny felt a rush of gratitude toward her teacher and could hardly hold herself back from hugging him right there on the spot.

Sirius ignored him. "I have a little something for you," he said ominously, then reached into his robes and pulled out a flattened roll of parchment, which he thrust at Remus.

Remus unrolled and read the parchment. His hands began to shake immediately, and Ginny moved toward him, curious and afraid.

"What is it?" she asked, reaching out for it. Remus shook his head, but put it in her hands at once, and she read the scroll for herself.

I, Remus Lupin, hereby declare myself solely responsible for any physical or financial damage that should occur as the result of imbibing an amateur Wolfsbane Potion. Virginia Weasley bears no responsibility for this potion's failure to sedate me, during the hours of the full moon. I will answer to any crimes I have committed as a werewolf, when I have fully returned to my human state. Furthermore, Virginia Weasley bears no responsibility for my own life, should this potion prove to contain a fatal overdose of wolfsbane, or any other ingredient. Virginia Weasley is also hereby absolved of responsibility, should I take my own life during the hours of the full moon. I enter into this contract willingly, and have been informed of all possible aftereffects. I am aware that this is an illegal action, and I will bear all consequences accordingly.

Signed: _____ Dated: _____

Ginny let go of the scroll with one hand, and it rolled up loosely, on its own. She was suddenly so afraid that she could hardly see straight, but she turned to Remus and found her voice.

"You can't sign this," she said weakly. "Don't sign this. I don't want you—"

"Hurt?" Sirius interrupted, his voice hard. "Endangered? Involved in an illegal activity? It's a little late to think of those things. He *has* to sign that contract. Your brother is concerned about you, and I think we owe your family a measure of protection for you, since we are acting as your guardians."

"My... brother?" Ginny looked at Sirius, confused. "Ron told you to do this?" She couldn't believe it. He'd seemed so supportive.

"Here, let me see." Harry had stayed very quiet, but now he was right beside her, tugging the scroll out of her hand.

"Your brother Bill," Sirius replied, "who very barely consented to allow this to continue without informing your parents."

Ginny blanched and looked at Harry, who was frowning gravely at the contract. "But you... Harry, I thought you didn't tell Bill what the ingredients were for."

He met her eyes at once. "Of course I didn't," he answered simply.

"I did." Sirius stood up and addressed Remus, who was staring at him incredulously. "After a meeting at the Ministry, the other day, Bill mentioned that Harry had asked him to send some interesting ingredients here, from Knockturn Alley."

"And you thought it was wise," Remus said faintly, "to tell him what they were for?"

"No less wise than sending for the ingredients in the first place." Sirius gave Harry a piercing look, and returned his gaze to Remus. "He was concerned about Ginny's liability—not surprisingly. I was concerned about your health. I told him to give me a chance to talk you out of it before he involved the Weasleys. Of course, that didn't work."

"You went and *told* on me to *Bill*?" Ginny fumed, unable to believe what she was hearing. "Sirius, did it ever occur to you that I'm seventeen, and of age, and willing to take responsibility for *myself*?"

Sirius ignored her and spoke to Remus. "Go ahead and sign it. I think you know it's necessary."

Remus still looked shocked, but he held out his hand to take the parchment from Harry, and walked to his desk.

"Don't put your name on that," Ginny said earnestly, following him and putting her hand over the inkbottle. "I'd rather be the one in trouble—this was my idea."

Remus looked at her and shook his head. "It's my risk," he said, then had to clear his throat and start again, because his voice was so dry that the words hadn't quite come out. "This is my risk," he repeated. "I'm glad someone thought of this, actually—though I very much doubt that it will be necessary." He gently took her hand from the inkbottle and dipped his quill, then signed the contract with a neat, firm hand.

When the ink had dried, he rolled up the parchment and handed it to Ginny.

"You keep this, in case of an emergency." Remus's tone was very normal. Very controlled. But Ginny felt a very tense and palpable heat, coming from his body, as he stepped around the desk and crossed to the door, motioning for Sirius to follow him. "I'm going to make tea," he said curtly. "Why don't you join me."

It wasn't a question, and Remus didn't stay to hear the answer. After shooting another hostile glance at Ginny, Sirius left the room as well.

Ginny wanted to curl up the armchair and cry. Better yet, she wanted to throw something. This potion had caused far more anger and pain than she'd anticipated, and the moon hadn't even risen yet. If anything went wrong... She couldn't bear to think about it.

Swiping at her eyes with one hand, she pulled her wand with the other and began furiously to clean up after herself. The cauldron spun out of the fireplace and clanked to the floor at her feet. She dried up the remainder of its contents and Summoned her tools, letting them fall with a bang into the iron belly where there had just been Wolfsbane Potion. Or what she hoped had been Wolfsbane Potion. She didn't know.

"Want help?"

Ginny jumped. She had honestly forgot that Harry was there. He stood by the desk, looking grave and worried.

"Yes," she answered honestly. "But it's nothing you can help with."

"Why, what is it?" Harry said, glancing at the cauldron as if it wouldn't be all that difficult to float the thing upstairs.

"It's the potion—I shouldn't have done it—I want Remus to be all right and I don't want Sirius to hate me." The words tumbled out of Ginny before she could stop them, and she felt herself begin to cry. She gritted her teeth against the tears, but they got through anyway, and she rubbed them from her face fiercely, hating herself for being such a baby.

Harry watched her edgily, seeming a bit panicked. "Sirius doesn't hate you," he finally said.

Ginny laughed, though it sounded more like crying. "Oh, right, that's why he's stalked me all over the house, and given me horrible looks, and told my brother what I'm doing." She shook her head. "Maybe he's just worried about Remus—but so am I—and he just thinks I'm irresponsible and careless. Damn it." She put down her wand and put both hands over her face, wishing she had a tissue. The truth was that, aside from her fears about Remus, it was unbelievably painful to know how poorly Sirius thought of her, right now. His opinion mattered to her, very much. He headed the Order of the Phoenix, he was one of her father's trusted friends—and he was Harry's godfather.

"He doesn't hate you," Harry repeated. But this time his voice was very close.

Ginny looked through her fingers and found herself eye to eye with him. He held out something white.

"What's this?" she sniffled, taking it quickly and blinking in surprise. "You carry a handkerchief?" she asked, hiding a smile at the old-fashioned gesture.

"Not really." Harry reddened slightly. "I was carrying it around because I ripped up my ankle yesterday. Bad landing. Figured I should have something on me in case it started bleeding again—don't worry, I didn't use it yet," he said quickly.

Ginny wiped her eyes, then turned away and blew her nose a little. "I wasn't worried," she managed, putting the handkerchief in her pocket, to wash. "Thank you, Harry." She turned around again. He was still right there, looking strangely awkward.

"You're welcome," he said, then tentatively reached up his hand and briefly touched the side of her face.

Whether he was wiping away a stray tear, or merely touching her, Ginny didn't know. She stared at him, feeling his fingertips move slightly, then leave her skin. She wished they wouldn't. She had an urge to lean forward and keep them there. Being touched like that by Harry, even very briefly, left her with an empty, wanting feeling.

"It'll work," he said simply, pushing up his glasses with the hand he'd just used to touch her. "I'm going to go and practice on my own, but I'll be back before the moon comes up. Will you be

okay?"

Ginny nodded wordlessly, and watched him go, her stomach clenching like a cold, metal fist, at the mention of moonrise. It was nearly two o'clock. Moonrise wouldn't happen for hours. There was a tightness in her chest that she couldn't escape, and, now that Harry was gone, she suddenly registered the sounds of very angry male voices, coming from the direction of the kitchen.

Not wanting to hear Sirius and Remus fight about the same thing, all over again, Ginny quickly floated her cauldron upstairs and shut her bedroom door. She sent the cauldron into its corner with a loud bang.

Hermione, who was lying on her bed reading, sat up. "I heard fighting," she said gently.

Ginny didn't answer. She leaned back against the door, not sure where to go, positive that she would cry again, if she opened her mouth. Or else throw up, from nerves. She pressed her lips together and felt her forehead wrinkle up and her eyes squeeze shut. She was going to sob at any second. "If it doesn't work—" was all she managed.

In an instant, Hermione was hugging her and saying soothing things, and Ginny allowed herself to be guided back to bed for awhile. After all, there was nowhere she had to be, and no potion she had to brew.

There was nothing to do now, but wait.

* * * * *

On the way home from his self-imposed Quidditch practice, Harry met up with Ron, who had left the pub early, to be present for the transformation. Harry told him right away about the contract that Sirius had drawn up.

"Good," Ron said at once. "I mean, no offense to Remus—I know it isn't his fault he's a werewolf. But Ginny could get arrested for messing around with stuff like this, if anything bad happens, and if Sirius isn't going to keep Bill up to date, then the contract's not a bad idea." Ron looked very uneasy. "Just in case."

Harry felt nauseated. If that contract turned out to be necessary, it would mean that one of them had been hurt, or that Remus had badly injured himself. He couldn't stand to think about that happening. Moreover, he couldn't stand to think about how Ginny would feel. He knew too much about guilt to wish it on anyone else.

"It's going to work, isn't it?" Ron asked anxiously. "You watched her make most of it—it's fine, right?"

Harry didn't answer. He didn't know if it was going to work, but Ginny was feeling lousy enough without everybody adding new doubts into the mix. He looked at the sky, which was full of fiery clouds that made his stomach clench. The sun was setting. "C'mon," he said, and he and Ron hurried toward Lupin Lodge.

They dropped their things in the hallway and continued quickly to the back of the house, where Hermione was sitting in the sunroom with her knees pulled up under her chin, looking worried and quiet. Ron sat next to her at once and put a protective arm around her.

"What's happened? Anything?"

Hermione leaned her head on his shoulder. "Sirius is putting Remus in the shed," she said faintly. "It's awful."

Harry went for the door at once, needing to see Remus before he got locked up.

"No, Harry, don't—it's bad enough without everyone crowding, and Remus said he'd rather we stayed in—" Hermione called after him.

Not heeding her, he pushed out the door and strode into the back yard—then stopped. Across the patches of growing things, in the far corner of the garden, was a tableau he wasn't keen to interrupt. Remus was speaking to Ginny in low tones, and she was listening avidly, nodding every so often. Her hair lit up like a torch under the setting sun, making her appear especially strong. But otherwise she just looked frightened—her face was very white and Harry thought he could see her fingers trembling. When Remus finished speaking, he put out his hand, as if to shake hers, but Ginny ignored it and threw her arms around him. He looked startled, but briefly hugged her back.

Sirius stood beside the shed, watching them, anger evident in his features. He shook his head slowly from side to side, his eyes dark and furious, the angles in his face sharper than usual.

"The sun," he said harshly, moments later, and Harry could hear him from all the way across the garden.

Remus pulled back from Ginny and patted her shoulder, moving toward the shed. He pulled the door open, then turned back and very quietly said something to Sirius, who stood stonily and did not reply. Remus waited a moment, and when there was no answer, he reached out and touched

the top of Sirius's arm, then turned resignedly away.

Sirius came to life. He grabbed Remus's forearm before he made it into the shed and pulled him into what looked like a bone-breaking hug.

"I'll be right out here." Sirius's voice was low, but so urgent that it carried through the garden. "If it starts to go wrong I'll let you out and Padfoot'll deal with everything. I won't leave you in there."

Remus said something with a shake of his head, disentangled himself from Sirius with a half-smile on his face, and walked into the shed without another word. He shut the door firmly behind him.

"Lock it," Harry heard him yell, from inside.

Sirius raised his wand, and bolts slid heavily into place. He then walked the perimeter of the little structure, muttering spells that Harry assumed were meant to fortify the strength of the walls and the locks on the door.

Ginny hadn't turned toward the house. She remained where Remus had left her, staring at the door of the shed, her arms wrapped around herself as if she were very cold, though the evening was quite warm. She rocked forward and back, reminding Harry of when she'd been a little girl on the verge of telling him and Ron about Tom Riddle.

"Go in." Sirius came around the shed and motioned Ginny toward the house. His tone brooked no refusal.

Harry saw her spine straighten. She dropped her arms to her sides, but otherwise she didn't move an inch.

"Go *in*, Ginny. You've done what you wanted to do. I want all of you to stay inside with the door locked, no matter what happens. Unbreakable Charms on the first floor windows aren't a bad idea either. Understand me?"

"I want to be here—"

"*In*."

Harry felt a flash of anger on Ginny's behalf, remembering what she had said the other day, about people always ordering her around as if she were a child. Sirius had been doing a lot of that, lately.

"Go ahead," Remus called out, much more gently. "It's really all right. Go have dinner—I'm going to be fine."

Sirius folded his arms and stared Ginny down until she finally backed off. "Goodnight, Remus," she called, her voice thick.

"Goodnight, Ginny."

She turned and walked to the house, hugging herself again. As she came closer, Harry saw that her face was streaked with tears, though she was no longer crying. She looked tired and scared, and she stopped short when she noticed Harry standing there.

"Help me put spells on the windows?" she asked, her voice still slightly choked.

Harry nodded and followed her up the steps toward the back door. "What did he say?" he asked quietly.

She turned partly, her hand resting on the doorknob. "What do you mean?"

"Remus. When Sirius said he'd let him out of the shed."

Ginny pulled an uneven breath and Harry saw her knuckles whiten as she gripped the knob. "He said, no you won't, because there are children in this village and I don't want any of them ending up like me." She opened the door and went in.

Harry shuddered, wondering if the werewolf who had bit Remus ever felt guilty, or even remembered. Perhaps werewolves were unaware of the things they had done, in their bestial state—he'd have to ask Hermione. He stopped in the doorway and looked over his shoulder quickly, at the precarious metal shack that was Remus's cage. The last of the sunlight glinted on its roof, then disappeared, leaving the world in a fire of purple and red dusk. Somewhere beyond the forest, down at the line of the horizon, the moon had already risen. It would climb into the sky and its light would fall on the shed—and then it wouldn't matter how many contracts Sirius drew up. Nothing could stop what would happen to Remus.

Across the garden, Sirius still held his wand as if to cast a spell, but he had finished muttering and walking around the outside of the structure. Now he stood still, staring at the door, breathing heavily. His profile was sharp, his expression frozen with mute fury, and almost everything about his posture suggested that anger with Ginny was his uppermost emotion. But Harry noticed that his free hand dangled uselessly at his side, and that his left shoulder seemed to slump.

He tore his eyes away from his godfather and went inside, where he was surrounded by Hermione, Ron and Ginny, quietly casting spells on the windows of the sunroom.

"I'll get the front room," Hermione said softly, and Ron followed after her to check on the kitchen and dining area. Ginny disappeared into the study. Harry fought the urge to follow her and instead fixed the glass and locks on the front door. He managed the little window in the loo, and secured the back door with a few deft twists of his wand and a few Latin words, which he spoke without a second thought. He paused to appreciate the depth of his education, but only briefly, before he went into the back garden again and locked the door from without. He needed to speak with Sirius. He had no idea, however, what it was that he wanted to say.

Sirius kept his back to the house as Harry approached, giving him time to think about what exactly was on his mind. There were so many things to think about at once that Harry hardly knew where to begin. He had been ill at ease, lately, with Sirius's worried, protective... fatherish behavior toward him. It wasn't that he didn't like it, or that he wanted it to stop, but it was something he'd never experienced and it was difficult to accept—especially because it seemed to Harry that if Sirius was so over-concerned about his welfare, he must think him incompetent in some way.

Harry pulled thoughtlessly at high stems of grass, shredding the stalks in his hands as he went through the garden, his eyes trained on the back of Sirius's head. Mingled with his irritation was another unsettling feeling—a new, protective loyalty to Ginny. It bothered him that Sirius was so dismissive of what Ginny was trying to do for Remus. Partly it only annoyed him because Sirius was essentially treating her like a child and he knew how it felt... but part of him was angry simply for Ginny's sake. Seeing her upset made him irrationally, defensively angry—but whether it was his right to stand up to Sirius for her, or whether she would even *want* him to, he didn't know.

He was only feet from the shed when his approach was detected. Sirius jumped and jerked his head away from the door to glare over his shoulder. His expression only barely softened when his eyes fell on Harry.

"Go inside and lock the door," he said shortly. "It's getting too close."

Harry bristled. "Look, I just wanted to..." But he stopped. He still didn't know how to explain himself, and suddenly, looking at the door of the shed, he realized that Remus could hear him. It probably wasn't the time or place for demanding adult treatment from his godfather. He looked up at the sky, then back at Sirius, who had gone back to narrowly watching the shed, every muscle tensed.

"We can talk in the morning about whatever it is," Sirius muttered, not turning back. "I want all of you inside." He looked edgily toward the treetops that marked the horizon where moonrise would begin. "Go now."

But Harry didn't move. For reasons he wasn't quite sure of, he stayed put and pulled his wand. "I'll stay in case you need help," he insisted.

Sirius's gave a tense, bitter laugh, then smothered it almost immediately. His eyes flitted dangerously to Harry's wand. A silent, incomprehensible struggle played itself out on his face, before he opened his mouth to speak. "Unless you're planning to kill him with that, a wand isn't going to do you much good here. And what I *need* is to know you're inside where it's safe."

Harry straightened his shoulders and stayed where he was. "I think I can take care of myself," he said, his voice low and even.

Sirius's eyes flashed and he turned on Harry with sudden, violent energy. "I *know*," he said harshly. "I've seen you take care of yourself often enough when you shouldn't have had to, and I don't want you doing it again—especially not here, and not now—and not about *this*, of all things—damn it—"

Harry nearly jumped at the unexpected honesty of his godfather's remarks. He stared wordlessly at him, having no idea how to reply.

"Sirius."

Remus's voice issued from behind the metal walls with a strange, quiet strength, and Sirius's head dropped for a moment. He took several long, ragged breaths and raised his head, then surveyed the sky with one long sweep and, seeming to come to some decision, swept past Harry in the direction of the house.

"I'll be right back, Moony," he barked. "Harry, follow me."

Harry did so, glancing briefly at the shed. "See you, Remus," he said, and heard a faint, muffled reply in the affirmative.

Sirius was inside in several long strides, with Harry not far behind. In the sunroom, Ron and Hermione had returned to their spot on the sofa, where they were talking in low voices. Both of them stopped, however, and looked up at Sirius in surprise as he pulled the door shut with a decided slam.

Harry shrugged at the worried look Ron shot him, then paced across the room, as if on instinct. Balled up in a chair with her arms around her knees, Ginny was staring out of the window at the

shed. Her posture shifted entirely as Sirius entered; she sat up straight, put her feet on the floor, and fixed him with a defiant look. Harry stopped beside her chair and pinned his eyes on Sirius as well.

"These windows?" Sirius asked curtly, gesturing to the one on his left.

"They're Charmed," Ron replied. "So're all the rest on this floor."

Sirius nodded, and his eyes shifted from Ron and Hermione, to Ginny, and then slowly to Harry, before he spoke. "No matter what you see or hear from Remus tonight, you are not to mention it to him afterwards." His tone was not as cold as it had been earlier; he seemed closer to some kind of emotional explosion than he had then, and seemed to be having trouble keeping his tone of voice under control. "Do you think he wants to be witnessed at this?" He laughed hoarsely and looked back at Ginny. "You can't really understand what this means to him. He *appears* calm and cool where the wolf is concerned—and he's anything but. This is a *private*—" Sirius clenched his fingers, looking as though he couldn't quite continue.

"But Sirius..." Hermione's voice was soft, her face studiously turned toward him. "We—well, most of us—*have* witnessed this before."

Sirius looked at her sharply. "Do you think that was the real werewolf? You think what you saw that night, outside the Shrieking Shack, was everything? That was a *moment*, Hermione. You have no idea what he's capable of, like this—at least in that circumstance I was there to fight him, but tonight—" He shut his eyes, but Harry had a feeling that if he'd opened them again, he would have looked directly at Ginny. "He's in a cage, in that shed. He's got no one to fight but himself. And the damage—when I've already seen..."

Harry was glad that Sirius didn't finish his sentence. He'd imagined, too many times, precisely what damage Sirius must have seen.

When Sirius looked up again, his gaze was directed at Harry. "He needs a little bit of control over this," he managed, and Harry wondered for one terrified moment if he was about to see his godfather cry. He had a panicked urge to look away, but made himself keep eye contact. "The Wolfsbane Potion gives him that. We used to be able to give him that." He smiled, brokenly. "Your father had a pair of horns... there wasn't any way that Moony was getting past him."

Beside him, near his elbow, Harry heard Ginny take a small, choked breath. He didn't look at her. He didn't know what would come of the burn in his chest if he looked at anyone. He let his eyes wander out of the window and rest on the shed, as Sirius continued.

"I don't know why he's given that control away. I can't—pretend to understand it. And you—Ginny, you don't know what this is going to do to his spirit—" Sirius went quiet. His voice had failed him.

The silence that descended on the room was punctuated only by Ginny's dry, shallow breathing. Harry tore his eyes from the shed and looked down at the top of Ginny's head, coppery-bright even though the light outside was nearly gone and no one had bothered to light the lamps. Without knowing why he did it, Harry lifted his hand and placed his fingers softly on the crown of her head. She jumped, slightly, beneath his touch, but didn't move away. And Harry wasn't certain, but he thought that her shoulders had relaxed—if only barely.

Ron cleared his throat abruptly. Harry raised his head at once, expecting to see a meaningful glance directed his way, but Ron was pointing to the window, looking grim. "The moon," he said simply, and replaced his arm around Hermione's shoulders.

Harry felt the gloss of Ginny's hair disappear from beneath his hand as she leapt to her feet. For a split second, Sirius faced her, his face devoid of color. Then he whirled to the door and bolted through it, leaving it wide open as he ran toward Remus.

Ginny nearly threw herself against the window to watch, and Harry did the same. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hermione lock the door with her wand, then felt her and Ron come up behind him.

Harry squinted into the darkness at his godfather, who disappeared in mid-stride and was replaced by a streak of ebony in the moonlight. Padfoot. The moon itself had pushed partway above the trees and hung there in the black sky, immovable. Harry had a fierce urge to change its position, to black it out with a spell or force it back down and end this now. But there was no stopping the silver light that spilled gracefully across the forest and garden, reflecting gently off the slanted roof of the shed.

"I shouldn't have done this." Ginny seemed to be speaking more to herself than anyone else; it took Harry a moment to hear what she'd said. Her fingers curled against the glass. "I don't know what made me do this. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Ginny..." Hermione put her hand past Harry and touched Ginny's shoulder. "It'll be all right."

Ginny shook her head. "Remus is going to get injured," she whispered. "It's my fault. I have to do something, I want to go out there—" She turned as if to move toward the door, but Harry, Ron and

Hermione closed in around her, keeping her near the window. She made a soft sound of protest, but stayed where she was.

Seconds later there was a high-pitched, animal whine.

All four of them went still and listened. In the darkness, Harry could just make out the shape of Padfoot. The enormous black dog nuzzled his nose into a crack of the shed's door, where he continued to whine fretfully, as if seeking an answer.

"Shouldn't we hear a... growl, or a howl, or something?" Ron asked, anxiously nudging Hermione.

Harry was about to answer that they wouldn't hear anything, if the potion had worked properly, but he never got the chance. A very faint, tired whine echoed back to Padfoot from within the shed, and all of them froze.

"He's transformed," Ginny breathed, breaking the silence first. "He's a wolf. Oh, Remus..." She flattened her hands against the window and went paler than Harry had ever seen her. "Please," she muttered, to no one in particular.

Padfoot barked, making the four of them jump together, and continued barking in what sounded like a patterned succession. Harry imagined that they must be able to speak to each other, like this, because when Padfoot had finished making noise, Moony returned a quick, low, growling noise through the metal wall.

"What are they--"

"I don't *know*, Ron, shhhh."

Padfoot barked again, then chased his tail in a circle once and howled up into the night sky before bounding with shaggy, fluid grace up to the back door. Harry lost sight of him on the stairs, as he neared the side of the house, and an instant later, Sirius had blown the back door wide open, his wand out, his eyes bright and wild and focused entirely on Ginny.

Harry took an instinctive step back, to protect her. He couldn't tell, from the statement on Sirius's face, what his godfather was about to do.

But Sirius paid no attention to anything in his way. He came toward them with fierce purpose, reached between Ron and Hermione and around Harry, and took Ginny by her arms. In seconds, he had grabbed her up entirely, lifting her feet clear off the floor. She gasped as if Sirius was squeezing the life out of her, which Harry thought he probably was.

"I'm sorry," Sirius rasped over her shoulder, clutching her to him so hard that it looked painful, keeping his eyes pressed shut. "I'm so sorry, Ginny. You've done it."

At those words, Ginny's body seemed to slump, and she dropped her head on Sirius's shoulder. He held onto her for a moment longer, then kissed her forehead swiftly, making her give a laugh that sounded more like a gasp of shock. Hastily, he restored her to her feet and, with a joyful bark, he morphed into the dark and massive canine shape that had been Harry's first glimpse of Sirius Black. He disappeared back into the garden, taking giant leaps toward the shed, where he settled down, barking and whining at intervals, and seeming to shiver with relief whenever Moony answered.

In the midst of the noise and movement, Harry was surprised to feel a hand grip his wrist. He turned to see that Ginny, though standing on her feet, was swaying slightly and using him for support.

"I'm not..." she began, as if to explain herself, but trailed off, apparently lost, and looked around. Hermione and Ron were both staring at her—Hermione with open admiration; Ron gawping. Ginny barely laughed. "I know," she said to her brother, and shook her head, seeming as dazed as he was by her success. "I know. I think I'll... go to bed."

She let go of Harry's wrist and attempted to walk to the hallway, but her legs seemed weak, to Harry, and he felt she shouldn't try the stairs alone. Quickly he caught up to her and took her hand, pulling her arm across his shoulders so that she could rest on him. He reached his own arm across her back to hold her up by the waist. It was slim and soft in his grip, and suddenly it felt quite an intimate place to touch her. He nearly froze from nervousness, especially when it hit him that Ron and Hermione were still in the room, and most certainly watching his attempt at getting Ginny up to bed. *To sleep*, Harry told himself quickly, irritated to feel himself blushing when nothing had been insinuated at all, by anyone except himself.

Ginny turned her head slightly, shifted her body, and put pressure on his shoulders, for balance. "Thank you," she murmured, and barely caught his eye.

It was only a second, but Harry's heart leapt in relief. The look she'd given him told him that there was no need to move his hand away. He supported her out of the room and up the stairs without daring to glance back at the looks he *knew* were on Ron's and Hermione's faces. He barely registered the fact that her legs seemed quite steady on the stairs, and that she was hardly holding

onto him at all, meaning that she was probably fine to walk without his help. But, as his mind didn't seem to be working properly, he didn't think it was a good idea to trust his perception at the moment. He kept hold of her.

The girls' room was dark and quiet. Someone had left the window open; a cool, humid summer breeze played through the curtains and grazed pleasantly across Harry's unusually hot face. His cheeks seemed to burn more intensely the closer they got to Ginny's bed. When they reached it, she slipped her arm off of his shoulders, but he didn't follow suit. He couldn't bring himself to let go of her. Not yet.

"Thanks," she said again, her eyes lowered. "I'm okay now, really."

Her voice was oddly thick, and Harry wanted her to lift her face so that he could see it and make sure that she was telling the truth. "You are?" he asked doubtfully.

She nodded. "Mm-hmm," she replied vaguely. "I'm just surprised, you know?" She paused. "And really tired." She smiled a little and raised her eyes, and Harry saw that they were brimming with tears.

"Oh," he said awkwardly, "er..." It was the second or third time he'd seen her like this, in a week, and he couldn't get used to it. It was one thing when Hermione had an emotional outburst and flew into tears; he was almost used to those moments, though they were rare indeed, and he could laugh at them a little, thinking that Hermione was rather highly-strung. But Ginny was much lower key, and her tears unnerved him. Harry didn't have anything to give her, and he didn't know any way to stop them, though he somehow felt he *should* have known. Helplessly, he met her gaze. Only a few weeks ago, Ginny had put him to bed and given him his nightclothes when he'd returned from ushering the Dementor back to Azkaban. She'd known exactly what to do.

He had no idea.

"What do you... need?" he attempted, feeling very stupid, and wondering again what on earth had ever made her like him. Maybe she didn't, anymore. Or *wouldn't*, after this. She'd just made a Wolfsbane Potion—done something incredible—and here he was, standing here next to her, stuttering like an idiot.

She didn't answer right away, but did something that was, in Harry's opinion, altogether better. She briefly rested her head on his shoulder.

Harry shut his eyes, stunned by the sensations that she caused in him with such a simple movement. He hoped she wouldn't move again, quite yet.

"I don't need anything," she murmured, sending a bolt of pure electricity through the center of his body as her voice and breath vibrated on his skin. He held tightly to the warmth of her waist—partly because he wanted to keep touching her, and partly because he had to hold onto something in order to keep his footing. "You've helped so much." She was beginning to sound drowsy, as if he'd just roused her from sleep to have this conversation. "If you hadn't written to Bill, I couldn't've done it. You've been... such a friend, to me."

Harry was on the verge of admitting that he wanted to be more than a friend, to her, when he felt the weight of her head disappear from his shoulder. Disappointment rushed through him—but was replaced almost instantly by sheer, startled pleasure.

Ginny's lips were on his cheek.

"Goodnight, Harry." Her whisper stirred the little hairs on the skin of his face, giving him terrible gooseflesh and a painful desire to turn his face the necessary fraction and kiss her fully on the mouth. If her lips felt like this on his skin, he could only imagine what they would feel like, moving against his own. He gathered his courage.

But she was moving now, pulling away from his hand, slipping out of his grasp and crossing to her desk, where she picked up a scroll of parchment that Harry recognized as the contract Remus had signed. Ginny drew her wand and set the parchment on fire in midair, before her. It flared up beautifully in the darkness, lighting her like a flame for a fleeting second before for she twisted her wand once more, sending the fire and ashes away into thin air. She nodded briefly, lay down her wand and withdrew a nightdress from her bureau, then turned and looked at Harry, pajamas in hand, smiling a little. She was obviously waiting for him to leave so that she could change, and Harry knew he should go. However, he was rooted to the spot, watching her, wondering how it was that her hair could shine like that even after the fire was extinguished.

"I promise I'm fine," she said. He didn't move. "Really, Harry," she insisted, as if concern for her welfare was his reason for continuing to stand there, staring at her. After another long moment in which he couldn't seem to move his limbs, Harry realized that he had better pretend that it *was* the reason.

"All right," he said, hoping that his voice sounded normal. "Er... sleep well." He headed for the door, trying to shake the electricity from his brain and make it think properly. It was difficult. Only

when he'd left the room and nearly shut the door, did he realize what he ought to be telling her. He turned back in the doorway so quickly that his glasses slid down a bit on his nose.

Ginny stood in the middle of her room, holding her nightdress and watching him questioningly.

"You were amazing," he blurted, feeling his face go red. "I mean it. Congratulations."

Ginny's eyes widened, and she turned so pink that Harry could see it even in the darkness, but she couldn't fight the lopsided smile that broke across her face.

They stood there for several seconds, gazing at each other, before Harry came to his senses, bid her goodnight, and shut the door with a shaking hand. He returned downstairs, hardly thinking of anything coherent at all. There was only Ginny, and how close he'd just come to kissing her, and how *soon* he was going to *really* kiss her, if he ever got the chance, and how damned brilliant she'd been for the past few weeks.

Past few months, really.

Maybe even the past few—

"She okay?"

Harry jerked out of his stupor and felt his face get hot again as he met Ron's steady, arch-eyebrowed gaze with his own. "She seemed okay," he managed, furious with his voice for cracking so obviously when it hadn't done so in years.

Ron's mouth twitched, and he gave Harry a look so deliberately casual that it wasn't casual at all. "Glad to hear it," he said evenly. "Going to bed. Hermione's still in there—" he jerked his thumb at the sunroom "—if you want an Arithmancy lesson. Night."

"Night." Harry went past Ron, still hot in the face, and joined Hermione in the sunroom. She didn't say a word, or lift her eyes from her book, and he was grateful to her for it. The two of them waited there halfway through the night, watching out the window at the moonlit shed, while Harry's cheek burned beneath the touch of an absent mouth.

The Morning After

The first thing the dog became aware of was that he was wet. He didn't move anything except his ears and tried to listen to his surroundings. A bird sang a high-pitched note very close to him and he realized that he was outside. Slowly lifting his head, he squinted slightly and realized by the soft brightness that it was already dawn. He leapt to his feet and shook out his fur, enjoying the feeling of the water droplets being thrown from his body and into the air.

There was an obstacle in front of him and he recognized it. He wouldn't be able to get past unless he turned into the man again. But first, he had to know if it was safe. He padded right up to the door of the run-down building so that his nose was sniffing at the narrow crack at the bottom. He couldn't smell the wolf, but just to make sure, he let out one soft bark. A voice, and not a growl, responded.

"It's all right, Padfoot. I'm okay. You can come in, if you're still talking to me."

The dog let out a bark that sounded like a laugh and bounded once around the garden. Then, because he was such a large animal, and the garden was quite small in comparison, he did it again two more times. He skidded to a halt in front of the door, transforming quickly into the man as he did so.

Sirius Black held out his hands to keep himself from banging his head into the metal shack and let out a real, human laugh this time. He smoothed his robes, and noted that the dog had left his shoes caked with mud. He pulled his wand out of his pocket and held it up to the door, muttering a few well-chosen spells. There was a sound of metal sliding against metal, a clank as locks unlocked. When the last barrier was removed, the door swung outward from its own weight, and Sirius slipped inside and pulled it shut behind him.

Remus Lupin was on the wood floor of the shack, propped up on the pile of pillows and blankets that Ginny had placed in there the day before. He looked pale, tired, weak, but his lips were twisted into a small smile and he was reclining against the wall as if he'd just wandered into the room to catch up on his reading. *Understanding the Rarest Magic* was in his hand, and he closed it, marking the page with his thumb, when Sirius entered.

"You can join me if you like," Remus said, motioning to the cushion next to him. "I won't bite."

"Unless provoked?"

Remus laughed but Sirius remained standing awkwardly by the door.

"Do you need anything? Water? Tea? Toast?"

"A cup of tea would be nice."

Without waiting to find out if Remus needed anything else from the kitchen, Sirius turned on his heel and ran to Lupin Lodge. He conjured up a cup of tea, and was about to add enough sugar to satisfy Remus's sweet tooth when a memory came flooding back to him. Rummaging around in the cabinets, he soon found what had become a common staple in the house ever since Ron had started picking up groceries. With a grin, he walked as quickly as he could with a tray of tea and biscuits back to the shed.

Remus's eyes were closed and his head was leaning against the wall of the shed—he was still upright. His book had fallen to his side.

Sirius carefully placed the tray on the floor and sat gingerly on the pile of pillows next to Remus. Hugging his knees and resting his chin on them, Sirius sat quite still, debating whether or not to wake his friend. Remus's skin was pale and translucent, and the shadows under his eyes were almost as blue as sky. Silver streaked his hair, and Sirius took a moment to reflect that those strands were the only silver that could safely touch his friend. Despite all this, Sirius didn't think he'd ever seen anything more peaceful in his life.

Realizing that Remus might be asleep for a while, and taking care to be as quiet as he could, Sirius shifted on the pillows a bit so that he was facing his friend directly. Although he looked tired,

Remus did not look as if he had spent a night in pain. Holding his breath, Sirius reached forward and stroked Remus's arms, peeling away his robes at the neck to examine the flesh beneath. It was smooth and white and cool to the touch. There were no visible gashes, no tears on the robes, no bloodstains seeping through worn fabric. Remus was tired, but he was not hurt.

Sirius sat back on his heels and breathed a sigh of relief. Perhaps he'd overreacted. He shouldn't have been so hard on Ginny. He was so grateful to her now that had she walked into the shed at that moment, he would have hugged her even more tightly than he had the night before.

"So—" Remus spoke, but did not open his eyes. Sirius started—Remus must have noticed him checking for wounds. "Will I live? Have you checked *everywhere*?" Remus's voice sounded concerned, but Sirius could detect a smile forming on his lips. "Wolves are quite flexible, you know."

Sirius couldn't laugh, but said lightly, "Joke if you like, Moony, but just wait—I'm certain that I can find something to do that will worry you just as much."

Remus pulled himself upright on the pillows and looked down at his hands. "I don't doubt that," he said. "I worried about you when we were at Hogwarts and when I wasn't angry with you, I was worried about you when you were in Azkaban."

Sirius allowed himself to gaze for one long moment into Remus's eyes. He smiled a sort of half-smile, which Remus returned, and then turned to pick up the tea tray behind him. He placed it on Remus's lap.

"Thanks," Remus said, and then, with a soft chuckle, picked a sugar quill up from the side of the tray and slowly stirred it into his tea, not stopping to drink it until the feathery top of the candy floated lightly on the surface.

Suddenly very tired, but no longer anxious, Sirius reached for a sugar quill as well, rested his head against the wall of the shed, and closed his eyes, feeling the sweetness filter through him. There would always be worry, but there would also always be relief. He heard Remus take a few hesitant sips of tea, and then place the cup and the tray on the floor. Sirius allowed his whole body to recline, reaching for a pillow to put under his head. A moment later, Remus settled next to him, gently sliding one slender arm over Sirius's chest. Their breathing joined into a rhythm, and Sirius finally allowed himself to relax. In seconds, he was asleep.

— CHAPTER FOURTEEN —

Plans for Autumn

It was noon when Ginny blinked awake. She felt a surge of sickening anxiety and shut her eyes again, but remembered after a few groggy moments that everything was over. The Wolfsbane Potion had been a success, and there was nothing to feel guilty and worried over—at least not today.

Yawning happily, she managed to roll out of bed and trudge downstairs for breakfast. The house was warm, bright, and quiet, but she quickly discovered that she wasn't in it alone. Harry was asleep at the dining room table, his head on his arms.

She stopped in the doorway and let her eyes travel from his hair, which was sticking up all over, to his back, which rose and fell each time he breathed. Part of his profile was visible, allowing her a glimpse of glasses, nose, and open mouth. It was all she could do not to walk across the room and gently kiss him awake—she felt, as she had always felt, that she should have had the right. Instead, she quickly and quietly pulled her wand and made a cup of tea, then took the seat across from him without making a sound.

"Harry," she whispered, reaching a tentative hand across the table to softly touch his hair. "Harry, wake up."

He gasped and started, sitting up so fast that Ginny had to yank her hand away. His glasses fell to the table with a clatter. He fumbled for them violently with his left hand, putting his right hand to his wand at the same time. He finally managed to fix the glasses on his nose, panting. Not until his eyes focused on Ginny did he let out a heavy breath of relief and release his grip on his wand.

Ginny watched him without a word. She'd had her own nightmares for a long time, after everything that had happened with Tom Riddle, and she knew, mostly from stories she'd heard, that Harry suffered from nightmares as well. They were horrible things, and the worst ones felt *too* real—but the panic that had been coming off of Harry in waves was subsiding now, as he came awake. Whatever terrible dream he'd been having seemed to be ebbing away as he looked at her. Ginny could have sworn that she felt the change in the air itself.

"Hi," he said hoarsely, reaching his fingers under his glasses and rubbing his eyes. "Wh'time is it?"

"Noon," Ginny answered. "But I just woke up."

"I figured you'd sleep longer than that—aren't you still tired?"

"No," Ginny insisted, but immediately broke out in a wide yawn that made both of them laugh. "Looks like you are, though." She pointed to where he'd been sleeping on the table. "Were you up late?"

Harry shrugged. "I stayed up and watched the shed. I don't know what time it was."

At once, Ginny felt the rush of admiring love she'd had for him her entire life. It was so very *Harry*, really, to stay up and watch out for everything well beyond what was actually necessary. Full of a sudden, unstoppable affection, she reached her hand across the table and touched the top of his, coming wide awake at the brush of his Quidditch-weathered knuckles beneath her palm.

Harry took her hand in his at once. "Glad it's over?" he asked, gazing at her seriously.

Ginny caught a silent breath. His eyes were unreal. And the tone of his voice—well, if anyone knew about being glad that an awful thing was over, then it was Harry. "So relieved," she answered honestly. "I can't even tell you. I don't feel sick for the first time in weeks."

Harry nodded in understanding, and gave a half-smile. "Well, I wouldn't get too comfortable. Sirius'll probably *make* you brew that potion next month, now he knows you can do it. So you've got—" he rotated his wrist without letting go of her hand, and checked his watch unnecessarily "—two weeks off." He grinned.

"Oh, no," Ginny laughed, putting her chin in her free hand. "I'm never doing that again, are you mad? Once was bad enough, and I'm sure it was a fluke—Remus will want somebody who can brew

it consistently so that Sirius doesn't worry like that again—

"I'm fairly certain," came a very tired voice from the kitchen door, "that it was not a fluke."

Ginny and Harry snatched their hands away from the center of the table, and turned to see a very pale, haggard, and smiling Remus, leaning on the doorframe.

"Remus!" Ginny jumped to her feet and ran to throw her arms around him. He caught her and weakly patted her back.

"Yes, I lived to tell the tale and you won't have to go to prison."

"Don't joke," Ginny yelled, muffled, into his shoulder. She pulled back and looked at him. His skin seemed to sag from the fine bones of his face and his hair was perhaps a little more grey than it had been just yesterday. His eyes, usually grey flecked with gold, were still quite yellow. It was very strange. "Tea?" she offered quickly, to stop herself from staring.

"Thank you, yes." Remus sat down, shaking almost unnoticeably, stretching his neck from side to side.

Ginny made the tea quickly and, not sure why she was doing it, went to the pantry and retrieved a little vial of Sunseed oil. She had never used it in any recipe or potion before, but she tipped a teaspoonful into Remus's tea without a second thought.

He frowned at the tea's oily surface when she handed him the cup. "What's in this?"

"Oh." Ginny wasn't sure how she was going to explain. "It's... Sunseed oil. I'll make you another—"

"No, no." Remus looked up at her, and in his expression was the same curiosity she'd seen on the day in the garden, when she had separated the seeds. "How did you know to do that?" he asked gently.

"I..." She looked to Harry for help, only to find him looking at her with the same wondering expression. "I really don't know," she confessed, returning her eyes to Remus. "Why—is that what you're *supposed* to be drinking?"

Remus shrugged, wincing as he did so. "Well, it's not necessary. But it does act as a balm on the muscles after they've been rearranged twice in twenty-four hours." He smiled grimly. "A lucky discovery, made about twenty years ago."

"I must've read it somewhere then," Ginny said doubtfully, resuming her seat. "I guess we learned it in class."

Harry shook his head. "I never learned that at Hogwarts."

"I don't believe that it was a coincidence," Remus said lightly, fixing Ginny with an interested stare, "just as I don't believe that your ability to brew a perfect Wolfsbane Potion was a fluke. I was unsure at first, but the longer I know you, the more I doubt that these... impulses of yours... are merely educated guesses."

"Well, what are they?" Ginny demanded, her stomach twisting. She knew, the moment that he said it, that Remus was right. There *had* been something strange. She'd been *feeling* things. It wasn't an accident. "What is it? What am I doing that I don't know about?"

Remus shook his head. "First, I want to ask you—although perhaps I should speak to your mother—"

"No," Ginny nearly hollered. "We can tell Mum later."

"Well, it's going to require her permission." Remus smiled. "But I suppose I really ought to ask you first. After all, it's your education."

Ginny knitted her eyebrows together. "My education? What are you talking about?"

Remus clasped his hands on the table and looked at her steadily. "I'd like to teach your seventh year."

It was several moments before Ginny found her voice. Her head had just gone into full spin—she'd been assuming that, at the end of summer, she'd have to return to the Burrow for a home education. Her mother had written to her several times, anxiously inquiring how she wanted to set up her studies, and Ginny had all but ignored the topic in all of her replies. She didn't want to go home to the Burrow. She didn't want to go anywhere to school, except Hogwarts. And she certainly didn't want to leave Harry and Ron and Hermione, to live in her old room as if she were still a baby who'd never left home to begin with.

Never had she even considered the fact that Remus might tutor her. It seemed too wonderful an option to be real.

"Do you mean it?" she whispered, gripping her tea-mug in both hands. "You want to... to teach my whole year—all my subjects?"

Remus nodded. "Though I imagine you may outwit me in the Defense Against the Dark Arts department." He smiled, but his eyes were very grave. "Don't feel you have to say yes, Ginny. This

is selfish of me to ask, and you need to make the decision based on—”

“No! I mean, yes! Yes!” Ginny cried, more excited about school than she had ever been in her entire life. “You’re the best teacher I ever had—does this mean I can *stay* here? What books do I need? When will we be starting? How is it selfish?” She stopped pelting him with questions when she realized that Harry was stifling laughter. “What’s so funny?” she demanded. He shook his head quickly and held up his hands in self-defense.

Even Remus was grinning. “It’s selfish because part of my reason for wanting to keep you here has nothing at all to do with your education. I thought that perhaps we could barter.” He paused, looking unsure of his next words. “I want you to continue to make the Wolfsbane Potion for me. I... want the privilege of transforming in my home. Near my friends.” He looked back into his tea mug. “It’s been a very long time.”

Ginny felt a thrill of honor at the idea of giving Remus such a gift—but it still remained that making the potion was a dangerous endeavor, a fact which she understood now better than ever. She barely shook her head, “But what if I—”

“You won’t fail.” Remus’s eyes were strangely bright. “I trust that you have a gift that won’t *allow* you to fail.” Ginny opened her mouth to ask what it was, but Remus interrupted before she managed to speak. “I want to help you study your gift, as well—but please don’t ask me to explain it yet. I realize how curious you must be, but I want to do some research and be sure of what I’m saying.”

Ginny shut her mouth in consternation. She was desperate to know what her ‘gift’ was, and equally desperate to stay in Stagsden near her friends, with Remus for a teacher. She did not, however, know if she trusted herself quite as much as Remus seemed to trust her. “What does Sirius think of my trying it again?” she asked slowly.

Remus laughed through his nose. “I think you will find that his opinion on the matter has entirely changed since last night.”

“And... would I stay here, with you?”

At this question, Harry sat up a bit straighter and looked attentively at Remus.

“I think that would be best, yes. Until you complete your studies.”

Ginny thought a moment. “Well... if Lavender and Seamus are getting married September first,” she said, making her decision as she spoke, “then I suppose... we’ll have to wait and start our classes on the second.”

Remus smiled—an open, youthful smile that made his eyes light up as the circles beneath them disappeared. Ginny thought she was seeing what he must have looked like in school. He was very handsome, and the wayward twist at one corner of his mouth gave her a sudden idea that he’d once been rather more prone to mischief than she ever would have guessed.

“You’ll stay?” he asked quickly, sounding not at all tired.

“Yes, I will,” Ginny affirmed, smiling back. And though her insides continued to thump with worry about the potion, her overwhelming feeling was one of excitement. She would get to study her seventh year with a great teacher. She would get to stay at Lupin Lodge. She’d get to stay with Harry. And maybe she was making too much of nothing, but Harry was definitely grinning right at her.

“This is going to be great!” she burst out, “I can’t wait, we’ll have to make sure it’s all right with my parents—no, wait—don’t tell my mum yet, I want to be here when you tell her. She’s coming with Penelope before the wedding, and we can do it then, is that okay?”

Remus agreed that he would wait for Molly’s visit, and together they began to discuss the best date to start classes, which lessons should go when, and what textbooks she would need to obtain. Halfway through the conversation, Ron and Hermione burst into the kitchen, both pink-faced and sweating a bit from “a long walk outside in the sun”. Hermione positively flew into raptures when Ginny told her the news of Remus’s offer.

“You can have all my books!” she exclaimed. “I kept them all. And I have my notes organized by date in folders, if you’d like to study from them, and I kept most of the major projects so when you get to those just let me—”

“Why is it,” Ron interrupted loudly, “you never let me have one single page of your ruddy notes, and you’re letting her have all of ‘em?” He turned on Ginny. “*And* you get everybody’s favorite teacher to yourself for a year. This is royally unfair.” But he wasn’t fooling anybody. He looked thrilled for her.

Red in the face, Remus insisted that he was nobody’s favorite teacher, which caused all of them to chime in with reminders of Neville Longbottom’s first Boggart, and Harry’s first Patronus. They were all near to crying with mirth at the memory of Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle tottering onto the Quidditch pitch from beneath a hooded cloak when an official-looking owl swooped down in front

of Harry, holding out its leg.

Harry untied the parchment and opened it, still looking to be in a wonderful mood. But as he read, his face began to lose color—so quickly that the happy chatter around the table trailed off, and Ginny grew frightened that the letter announced a death.

“What’s happened?” she demanded quietly. “Who’s it from?”

“Ministry owl,” Ron muttered. “Classified Confidential tags—what’s it, another Auror invite, or—”

“No. It’s from Charlie.” Harry held out the letter to Ron, and Ginny saw his shoulders slump, a little. “Read it if you want.”

“To Mr. Harry Potter,” Ron began, aloud, and stopped. “Pretty formal, coming from Charlie!”

“Go on, Ron, let’s hear it,” Hermione urged, coming up behind him and peeking over his shoulder.

“Right. ‘At this time, due to unforeseeable circumstances concerning the Dementors at Azkaban, the Ministry of Magic is organizing a Permanent Azkaban Patrol division. This new division will be responsible for insuring the Dementors remain contained on the island of Azkaban, thereby maintaining the safety of the civilian wizarding and Muggle population.’” Ron stopped reading again, and laughed shortly. “Well, doesn’t that just sound like fun.” He looked at Harry. “Didn’t you already tell Moody you didn’t want a part of this?”

Harry shrugged, his eyes on the table. “Moody’s not in charge of this, I guess,” he muttered. “Keep reading.”

Ron did. “‘The P.A.P. will work from dragonback—’ Damn, *dragon* back? Is he insane or what? ‘—to insure that the Dementors are fully corralled and imprisoned at all times. The Ministry of Magic, P.A.P. Division, invites you, as a professional flier and recognized wizard in your field, to join our ranks. A private informational session will be held on September seventh, and nine dragon riders will be selected at that time for further training. Reply immediately if you mean to attend. Sincerely, *Charles Weasley*,’” Ron and Ginny snorted, “‘Chairman of the Permanent Azkaban Patrol. p.s. Hey, Harry, sorry about the form letter, hope you want to give this a try—give Ron and Ginny a hello, and Remus too. See you, Charlie.’”

Harry had put his head in his hands, and was steadily working his hair into worse shape than Ginny had ever seen it. “I have to say yes,” he muttered.

Ron gave Harry a look to which he was totally oblivious. “Why’s that?”

“It’s your brother. What am I supposed to do, say no?”

“YES,” said Ron and Ginny together.

Harry looked up, bewildered. “I can’t do that.”

“Harry.” Ginny put her hand out for the letter and Ron handed it to her. She skimmed it once and shook her head. “How can you even consider it when you’ve got a shot at playing for the Cannons? Do you want to miss out on that?”

“Well, no,” Harry admitted. “But—”

“There were two dozen dragon riders trained during the war,” Hermione added, “weren’t there?”

Ron nodded. “Yeah, something like that. Harry, they have plenty of people to do this. It definitely doesn’t have to be you.”

Harry hesitated, and glanced at Remus. “It doesn’t?”

Remus sighed, and the light in his face went out again, revealing all the lines and hollows that the werewolf had carved into his features over the years. “That’s for you to decide, Harry,” he said. “But you’ll excuse me while I step in for your godfather—if Sirius wasn’t at trial, he would tell you in no uncertain terms that you’ve already done enough. There’s no need for you to spend any further part of your life chasing after Dark creatures.” He paused. “And I’m sure your parents would have said the same.”

Harry didn’t answer. He sat mutely, obviously finding it difficult to decide.

Ginny shot Remus a grateful look, and pulled her wand, ready to burn Charlie’s letter then and there. “Don’t do it, Harry,” she said simply.

“If Sirius was upset about *one* Dementor, imagine how he’d feel about you being around all of them at once,” Hermione pressed.

“Remember how much you enjoyed going up against the Hungarian Horntail?” Ron added wryly.

“And think about telling Oliver Wood that you’re not going to join his team,” Ginny finished. “Just *think* about the telling-off you’d get. You’d go deaf in minutes.”

Harry’s stared at her blankly—then looked around at all of them and gave a very real and unexpected laugh. “Okay,” he conceded. “Okay. Yeah. I’ll write back and say no.”

All those present at the table gave a breath of collective relief, and Ginny lit Charlie’s Ministry invitation on fire with an explosive snap. In seconds it had flared and disappeared.

“You’re getting good at that,” Harry shot, smiling slightly.

Ginny tossed her head. Harry had unknowingly complimented the first spell she had ever learned. "I've been doing that since I was six," she told him, "so I ought to be good at it."

"Six!" Hermione exclaimed. "How were you making fire at six?"

"Self defense," Ron answered for her. "She used to trick her toy wands into it—Fred and George used to try and stick her up in trees, lock her in closets, drown her in ponds..."

"They didn't!" Hermione looked scandalized, but her eyebrows came down after a moment and she shook her head. "Oh, of *course* they did." She turned to Ginny and sighed. "By the way... did you want to stop by today and tell the twins hello?"

Ginny frowned, not sure what Hermione was talking about, until it dawned on her that they had made plans to go into Hogsmeade and look for suitable dress robes to wear at Lavender's wedding. "Oh, right," she said, getting up. "Yes, I wrote and told them we'd say hi. Why... don't you *want* to?" She grinned wickedly.

Hermione tried to compose her face into a neutral expression, and failed. "Of course I do," she said unconvincingly. "If they won't..."

Ron turned to her in mock sympathy. "Don't worry, they're not going to spray you with Homework Repellent again," he said, sniggering violently. "School's out, what fun would that be? But still—oh, priceless—" Ron was lost in a spasm of uncontrollable laughter.

Harry and Ginny exchanged a merry glance. When they'd all visited Weasley's Wizard Wheezes for its opening last Autumn, Fred and George had "accidentally tested" a new product on Hermione that had made it impossible for her to go near her homework for nearly three days. Books and papers had soared away from her when she'd come too close. Quills had fluttered out of her reach. The Hogwarts library itself had repelled her with a staggering force. She'd been in a fit the whole time, and Ron hadn't been able to pick himself up off the floor, he'd been laughing so hard.

"Come on, Hermione," Ginny said, still giggling. "I'm sure they'll behave."

"I'm sure they won't," Hermione said grumpily, casting glares at everyone who was laughing at her old misfortune. "And I hate dress shopping."

Ginny wrinkled her nose. She wasn't particularly fond of dress shopping either—especially without much of a budget. But it had to be done. "It'll only take a second, and while we're in town you can help me look for books that might help me with my seventh year studies," she offered.

Hermione's face brightened at this, and she nodded. "You go by Floo and I'll meet you in front of Dervish and Banges in half an hour?"

Ginny agreed to the plan and set off upstairs to get dressed, touching Remus on the shoulder as she went, and giving him a grin.

He smiled back, if a little wearily. "Yes," he said, answering her silent statement. He reached up and patted her hand. "Yes. It's certainly going to be an... interesting year."

* * * * *

Hermione hovered in the doorway of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, which she had been doing for most of their visit, and checked her watch again. It wasn't that she didn't like Fred and George, but she didn't need her hair to be any worse than it was, and Fred's casual mention of some new product called Barber's Bedazzler had done nothing to set her at ease. She wasn't in the mood for green hair. Or blue hair. Or no hair at all—there was nothing she'd put past the twins.

"What, no hug goodbye?" George called out from across the shop, grinning mischievously over Ginny's shoulder as he hugged her.

"See you next week," Hermione replied coolly. Fred rolled his eyes at her, but she only arched an eyebrow and shrugged, trying to tell him that if he were any sort of trustworthy person, then she wouldn't have to stand in the door.

"Bye, Gin," Fred said, and Ginny joined Hermione at the door, carrying the shopping bag that held her dress robes and books, and a small bag containing a new invention of the twins'. Hermione looked dubiously at the bag.

"No worries, Hermione dear," George sang after them cheerfully. "I'm sure our thoughtful little sister will never use them on you."

Fred nodded solemnly. "But I reckon she'll share them with Ron, and we can't vouch for his behavior."

Ginny pressed her mouth shut on a smile and bid her brothers goodbye, and Hermione left the shop beside her, letting her thoughts travel a well-worn path. She believed—in fact she was almost entirely certain—that she would spend the rest of her life with Ron. They'd never talked about it. It just seemed... part of them. It was a wonderful thing to know, but it made encounters with the twins twice as troublesome, because Fred and George seemed to know it, too, and they'd adopted

her as a sort of second sister. Someone new to torture. Hermione knew she ought to have a better sense of humor about the whole thing, the way that Ginny did. But then, Ginny was a veteran of every variety of playful torment, while Hermione wasn't sure if she ever would be, not even if she *did* become a part of the Weasley family.

She did her best to put such official thoughts out of her mind, though it was hard to do with dress robes for a wedding swinging in the bag beside her. Getting married to Ron was a long way off. There were things she wanted to try first. Things she *needed* to try. Like going to the Thinker, which she was planning to do in just a week, and still hadn't told Ron about. At this point, it wasn't going to be pretty.

"Mind if I just pop into Honeydukes?" Ginny's voice broke into her thoughts. Hermione shook her head and perched on one of Hogsmeade's street-side benches to wait, absently tracing the head of a griffin, the claws of a manticore, and the widely spread wings of a dragon, which were carved expertly into the wooden arm.

She had to tell him today. There was simply no excuse for waiting any longer. The summer had been wonderfully free from tension—excepting the arrival of Draco Malfoy, which had proved, after all, to be little more than a nuisance—and she hated to walk right into a row, especially since, just this morning, everything had been so pleasant. She and Ron had gone on a really lovely walk... they'd discussed how uplifted Harry had seemed lately, and how wonderful it was that Ginny had managed the Wolfsbane Potion... and then Ron had maneuvered her into the woods behind the house and pinned her up against a tree, to kiss her until she could barely breathe. Or at least, he *thought* he had maneuvered her. Hermione smiled to herself. He wasn't the only one with strategies.

"Well, I'm done." Ginny was back, frowning at her receipt. "That's it for me, I can't spend another Knut until September." She shook her head. "And I still have to pay Harry back for those things we used in the potion."

Hermione forgot her own troubles for a second. "He'll never let you pay him back," she said, wishing it was her place to ask just exactly what was happening between Ginny and Harry these days. They'd seemed quite... together.

Ginny pocketed her receipt and shrugged. "It's not up to him, is it?" She smiled. "I'm going to go to the Three Broomsticks and use the fireplace—shall we have a butterbeer before going back?"

"No," Hermione said, growing pensive again. "I have to get back and talk to Ron before he goes to work." She glanced at Ginny guiltily. "I still haven't told him."

"About the Thinker?" Ginny didn't look surprised. "Well, he hasn't burnt the place down, so I sort of figured. It's all right, Hermione," she corrected quickly, and Hermione realized that her anxiety must be evident on her face. "He'll get over it. You just tell him. And if he acts like a prat, you tell *me*, and I'll use these on him." She held up the small bag of whatever horrid thing it was that Fred and George had given her, and Hermione tried to smile. "Spider eggs," Ginny giggled. "They hatch. The spiders disappear in a matter of seconds, of course, but all the same, they'll be nice to have handy."

Hermione did laugh, at that, and shook her head. "Don't, he'll lose his mind."

"Oh, and look who's talking," Ginny retorted, snickering.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Hermione, if anybody's been doing a bang up job of making Ron lose his mind for the past seven years, it isn't me." She smiled. "I'll see you at home. Good luck, and by the way—" Ginny set down her bags and hugged Hermione tight "—I'm so happy for you. I think you're making a great decision."

Hermione watched Ginny leave, wishing very much that she could have her hand to hold while she broke the news of her departure to Ron. Though, she reflected briefly, if he was any kind of boyfriend at all, she should be able to hold *his* hand for comfort, when she was through telling him her plans and goals. A pang in her stomach told her she was setting her hopes rather high, but she ignored it. Ron was an adult. They were out of school. He'd manage to see reason... eventually. Hermione screwed up her courage, shut her eyes, and Disapparated.

Once home, she set down her bags, and spent more than a necessary amount of time unpacking her new dress robes. She performed an ironing trick on them, then stood back and admired their color—she hoped that scarlet wasn't too daring, after all, it had been the color of Gryffindor Quidditch robes—then smoothed them with her hands several times before finally hanging them on the hook inside the closet door.

Tapping her fingers on her hips, Hermione looked around her room for something else to do. But the beds were made. The bookshelf was organized in alphabetical order. The clothes were all hung up, Crookshanks had been fed, and even the shoes in the closets were in straight lines. Hermione made a move to organize Ginny's desk for her, but stopped with a sigh, knowing that she was only cleaning in order to avoid talking to Ron, and that it was stupid to wait. Stupid, and not very brave.

Taking a deep breath, she left the girls' room and strode purposefully downstairs and into the sunroom at Lupin Lodge, where Ron liked to relax before leaving for his shifts at pub. Sure enough, he was sitting in Remus's father's old armchair, his long legs stretched out and his feet crossed, reading one of his old comic books and nursing a glass of cold pumpkin juice.

Hermione had entered the room quietly, and he didn't notice her until she was standing directly in front of him, blocking the light coming in through the window. He looked up with a grin and turned the comic book around to show her the page he was reading. "Tell me," he joked, "is this how Muggle women typically dress? No wonder Dad encouraged us all to take Muggle Studies."

Hermione pulled up a chair next to him and leaned in to look more closely at the woman that Martin Miggs seemed to be rescuing from a supermarket. She laughed and answered truthfully, "I'm sure that some Muggle women do dress that way—but no one in my family."

He laughed as well and turned the comic book back around to give the page another appraising look. "Pity," he said wryly. Then he threw it on the table, punched her lightly on the arm and asked, "So, what are you doing now?"

It was an invitation. Ron was smiling at her, and looking at her in that *way* he had. It was smiling and serious, and entirely focused on her, and it made her feel warm all over. Hermione wanted nothing more than to climb into his lap and tell him that she wasn't really doing anything and did he have any good ideas?

But she couldn't. For a moment, she thought she might be sick and she opened and closed her mouth several times before speaking. Finally, she summoned her Gryffindor courage, took one of his large hands in both of hers, and said evenly; "Actually, I wanted to talk to you about something."

She could see him tense a bit, but held onto his hand, stroking the top of it lightly with her fingers. Speaking one sentence didn't make it any easier for her to begin a second one. Still, she attempted a joke. "It's all right," she said lightly. "I'm not running off with Martin Miggs or anything like that. It's just—well—I've decided on a career. I know what I want to do."

"Really?" Ron sat up in the chair and looked eagerly at her. "You've chosen something? So what is it? Department of International Magical Cooperation? That one sounded perfect for you, and Dad'll be thrilled—he's been hoping you'd join the Ministry."

Hermione laughed shortly and shook her head. "Your Dad's really nice to me," she said and held onto Ron's hand a bit more tightly. "But I'm not going to be working for the Ministry—at least not yet." She stared at Ron, trying to communicate with her eyes, and he stared back blankly, as though purposely not getting what she was on about. He was going to make her spell it out.

Knowing that she was moments away from an argument, Hermione was surprised to discover that the knot in her stomach had disappeared and instead she was nearly trembling with anger. He wasn't going to support her decision—she just *knew* it—and it was selfish of him. Somehow, the anger gave her much more confidence than the fear had. She straightened and smiled brightly. "I'm going to apprentice with the Thinker."

The hand that Hermione was holding slid away from her grip and Ron used it to run his fingers through his hair. After a long moment, during which Hermione sat breathless with anticipation, Ron said, "So you've heard from her, then?"

Taking this to be a sign of encouragement, Hermione shook her head and explained, "No, I haven't. I mean, I'm not even sure that I'll be allowed to do it. I'm just going to show up and see if she'll take me."

"Really? So there's a chance that she won't take you?" The hope in his voice was about as subtle as a Howler. Hermione felt her face grow warm and even her legs were shaking. He didn't want to know about the Thinker. He didn't want to know why she wanted to do it. He didn't care what was involved in the training or what she might be able to accomplish for her parents when she returned to England. He wanted her to stay in England so that she could come home every day from some boring Ministry job and snog on the sofa. Deep down, she told herself that she should be flattered that he didn't want her to go away, but that wasn't helping her mood.

Hermione crossed her arms and answered in a voice that she knew sounded snippy, "There's always a chance, but I think it's *very* unlikely that I'll be turned away."

The hopeful look on Ron's face faded away and was replaced with an expression that Hermione had never seen before. It was neither angry nor sad—just blank. Hermione wasn't sure how to react. They sat in silence for what seemed like forever; she could handle Ron-in-a-rage, Ron-visibly-sulking, Ron-cracking-jokes, and Ron-hurling-insults, but this new, silent version was difficult to interpret. She thought carefully about what she wanted to say, and tried to figure out a way to word it that wouldn't sound as though she were being entirely self-centered and annoyed.

"Ron, you realize that this is something that I have to do—"

He turned to face her, and she felt a surge of relief to see anger in his expression. "Must be nice,"

he said coldly.

"What must be nice?"

"Knowing what you want to do with your life."

So *that* was what was bothering him. Hermione snorted derisively—*he* was the one who was self-centered, not she.

"Ron, I don't know what I want to do with my entire *life*, but this is an opportunity that is presenting itself *now* and I'll never forgive myself if I don't give it a try. I'm doing this because it is the only way that I see fit to try to help my parents. I can't very well help them if I'm off trying to improve relations between Bulgaria and Morocco, can I? I understand how you feel—"

"You have no bloody *idea* how I feel!" Ron erupted, jumping out of the chair and looking down at her furiously. Hermione stood as well, but he continued to boil over, pointing at her. "You've always been in control, all the time! You've always had drive, and ambition, and ability. You have NO idea what it feels like to work in a pub and not know where you're heading. NONE." Lines of anger appeared on Ron's forehead and his fists were clenched at his side.

Hermione was so stunned by his outburst that for a moment, she couldn't say anything at all. He was *jealous* of her? "Maybe..." she finally managed, her throat very dry "...maybe it's a good thing that I'm going away." She shook her head and moved to the door, knowing exactly what jealousy brought out in Ron, and wanting nothing to do with it. If he wanted to act like a little boy, then fine. She didn't need him, she thought angrily. She didn't need anyone but herself, and her parents. She knew it was an unfair way to think—Ron had been by her side through everything, but Hermione felt trapped by his reaction, and motivated to fight back.

"Maybe I'm *stifling* you by being here," she stopped and turned to face him, not bothering to disguise a bitter tone in her voice and unable to believe the direction that this conversation was heading.

"Oh, so what are you saying?" asked Ron sarcastically, crossing his arms in front of him.

She said the first words that came to her. "I knew you wouldn't want me to *leave*, I knew you were going to make this *hard* on me—I didn't know you were angry with me just for having opportunities. If I misunderstand you so much, and you can't be happy for me, or at least just support me, and if you don't want me around, then I'll make it easy. I don't have to wait until September—I can go back to the Burrow tonight." Hermione winced, realizing how silly she sounded. The threat was a bit weak; returning to the Burrow was hardly escaping from Ron's life, but what option did she have at the moment? She didn't have anyplace else to go, unless she wanted to set up permanent residence in her parents' room at St. Mungo's. Or at her old house. Where the walls still had scorch marks.

Ron's face was so pale that every freckle stood out like a tiny pinprick. He opened his mouth. Thinking that he was going to yell, Hermione took a step back and waited, but he did not speak. He only stared, then turned and walked steadily out of the room without another word. He slammed the door so hard upon leaving that several of Remus's books toppled from their shelves.

Left alone, Hermione let out a sob. She ran to the window, pushed the curtain aside with trembling fingers, and peered out. It took all of her willpower not to race after Ron; she could see him heading into the forest behind Remus's house, along the well-trodden path. He had a large stick in his hand and was mercilessly banging on trees as he passed them. Anger and compassion fought for the strongest hold on her emotions. Why couldn't he be happy for her? Why couldn't he just embrace her, and tell her that she was doing the right thing, and write her letters while she was gone? It was so silly. She'd be back by Christmas. It was just like being apart over the summer holidays.

Hermione watched Ron disappear into the trees without looking back once, and she felt her anger return. It wasn't her fault if he didn't like working at the pub. She *would* go to the Thinker. She would leave the day after Lavender's wedding, she would do whatever it took to become the next apprentice at Cortona, and she would find out everything that she could, in order to help her parents. No one was going to stand in her way, not even a tall, lanky redhead who happened to make her head spin.

Giving another sob, she leaned her forehead on the glass and closed her eyes.

* * * * *

Ron didn't think he'd ever been so angry in his entire life. He hit another tree with his stick and kicked at a large rock as he walked. He was wearing his summer shoes, and it hurt a bit when he did it, so he kicked it again, harder, and winced.

He knew that there was nothing he could do. There was nothing he could say to persuade Hermione *not* to go to Cortona. He also knew that her reasons for going were good ones. It still

hurt, however, that not two months after the defeat of Voldemort—two months that had been pretty much wonderful for them—she was already planning to leave him.

“Every ruddy time it starts working out, it all goes to hell again,” he muttered, stumbling into the clearing by the lake and leaning against the trunk of a large tree on the perimeter.

There had always been tension where he and Hermione were concerned, he thought, wondering briefly if it was really worth it. A fleeting image of her face in his mind, however, and he knew the answer. She meant everything to him, and always had, ever since he’d met her. Ron bent over and searched the soft ground for a smooth stone, and then, finding one to his liking, hurled it out into the lake, where it skipped three times before finally sinking into the water. That was about where he and Hermione had been standing the day before. Standing, gripping onto each other for dear life—Ron had hardly been able to hold back from everything that he wanted to try. But he *had* held back. She’d wanted him to. And he’d always been willing to do anything for her.

He didn’t even mind their silly rows—in fact, he started many of them on purpose. What had it been yesterday? Something to do with how they might rebuild the protective wards that had surrounded Hogwarts. Hermione had told him that it would require several months of precise Arithmancy calculations and perhaps the employment of several mathemagicians to make sure that everything would work together and Ron had said that it wasn’t really necessary—now that Voldemort was gone, who needed protective wards? Hermione’s eyebrows had shot up accordingly, and she had launched herself into a totally unnecessary History of Magic lecture; Ron knew what the wards were there for. But he had let her rant along for a good ten minutes before finally silencing her with a kiss. She always looked so *good* when she was fighting him.

But today was different. This was a *real* fight and they hadn’t had one of those since Ron had accused Crookshanks of eating Scabbers in their third year.

He hurled another rock, enjoying the burn in his shoulder. It took his mind off the thought of Hermione taking off for Greece. Ron stooped and grabbed a third rock, but he couldn’t really distract himself. Couldn’t she learn from somebody closer to home? Did she really need to be so far away? Didn’t she remember what it had been like for seven years? Evil and war had continuously interrupted their romance since before it had even begun. And now that there was relative peace in the wizarding world, now that they could be normal, and happy, and together—she wanted to *leave*?

Ron sat heavily against the tree trunk, suddenly exhausted, and began to pick at the weeds and sparse grass around him. Loss and disaster had marked everything good that had happened with Hermione, since the very first time they’d kissed. Ron shut his eyes, trying to remember.

He had waited until the end of their fifth year. The tension between them had been almost unbearable, but both of them had been so worried about Harry and Voldemort that there had been no time to deal with their feelings for each other. Ron had mustered the courage to hold her hand a few times, usually perfectly timed with the arrival of bad news so that it had seemed somewhat innocent. He’d even feigned a sudden interest in doing really well on his O.W.L.s so that he could spend as much time as possible studying with Hermione. Ron let out a short laugh, remembering how he’d used to try to get to the library first for study sessions, in order to choose the smallest table—that way his knees might bump ‘accidentally’ against hers. He remembered how flushed she had used to get about it, and how every once in awhile, she’d even forgotten the answers to simple study questions. Her lost expressions had always made his heart beat faster.

The evening after their last O.W.L. exam, they had been sitting up late in the common room, engrossed in a particularly fierce game of chess. Everyone, including Harry, had gone upstairs. Hermione had been sitting across from him, hair wild over her shoulders, pursing her lips and contemplating her next move. She’d been concentrating on the board for so long that her chess pieces had begun to taunt her. Ron had rearranged himself in his chair and reached out a foot under the table to kick her softly. She had looked up at once, forehead wrinkled, but he hadn’t moved his foot from where he had positioned it on top of hers.

“*Why’d you do that?*”

“*To make you hurry up.*”

“*Oh, and kicking me will make me hurry up? That’s excellent logic Ron.*” But though her tone of voice had been cutting, she had bitten her lip and fidgeted.

He had held up his hands in mock protest. “*Fine! Take your time. I’m not worried about me—I’m worried about your pawns, that’s all.*”

Hermione had finally made a move, and it hadn’t been a good one. She’d known it too; her face had been quite red and she’d averted her eyes from him and the board as soon as she’d made it. He’d noticed, suddenly finding it difficult to breathe, that she hadn’t

moved her foot either. He could have sworn that he'd been able to feel heat rising up through the soles of his shoes. Ron remembered looking down at the chessboard and, for the first time in his life, not being able to figure out anything that was going on. Several of his pieces were vying for his attention, and Hermione's pretty queen was blowing kisses at him—he'd looked away from it, only to find Hermione's own brown eyes watching him intently. Ron had quickly returned his gaze to the game. Hermione had done the same, making a soft *tutting* noise as her queen lifted her skirt to reveal a shapely pewter ankle.

After a moment, Ron had all but gasped to feel the pressure of Hermione's toes nudging at his other foot.

"Are you going to make a move?" she'd asked, her voice half-joking, and slightly nervous.

Ron had felt a delicious chill shoot up his spine at the meaning behind her question, and he'd looked up to see an expression on Hermione's face that had never been there before. She hadn't been looking at the chessboard. His heart had skipped a beat. He'd nodded slowly and then, in what he still counted as one of his braver moments in life, he had placed his hands on either side of the table. He'd pulled himself slightly out of his chair and leaned over the chessboard towards her. Hermione had blushed, but she'd looked at him with such an open, trusting expression that despite the fact that he'd been able to feel his heart pounding in his chest, it really hadn't been too difficult to press his lips to hers. And to his utter shock, she'd pressed right back...

A movement in the lake jolted Ron back into reality and he opened his eyes, squinting against the sunlight. That first kiss had seemed to last forever. If he could go back and repeat it, he wouldn't have let Hermione go upstairs that evening. He would have kept her on the common room sofa all night long, enjoying the feeling of holding her close and the sensation of her lips moving against his. He would have prolonged the euphoria for as long as he could.

Because it hadn't lasted. Life had stepped in and interrupted. Death, rather. Hermione had gone upstairs that night, looking backward over her shoulder at him the whole way, and Ron had run up to the boys' dorm and thrown himself into his own four-poster to dream the most fantastic things he'd ever dreamt.

And the next morning, Dumbledore had died.

Ron tried to shake off the memory. He stood and paced to the sandy bank of the lake, attempting to stay focused on Hermione, and the problems at hand—but as he looked out across the lake's smooth, glassy surface, it was impossible not to remember what had happened at the end of fifth year.

He'd woken up with that kiss on his lips. He and Hermione had grinned stupidly at each other all through breakfast, making Harry roll his eyes, and then all three of them had gone down to the lake and stretched out on the grass to relax in the sun. Lazily, Ron had commented that the past year had been relatively uneventful, despite their extra Defense Against the Dark Arts lessons. "*I've got my wand though, just in case,*" he'd joked. But he hadn't been thinking about magic. He'd been holding Hermione's hand, playing with her fingers until she'd given up trying to read the massive book that she had dragged outside. Together, the three of them had started discussing plans for summer and ways to make Harry's stay with the Dursleys as short as possible. Ron had been thinking about asking Hermione to come and stay for the *whole* summer. Everything had been perfect.

And then a scream had disrupted the warm silence of the day. All three of them had been on their feet in an instant. Wands out, they had stood rooted to the spot as other students had run past them in the direction of the castle. Something—or things—had risen up out of the lake and towards the banks where Harry, Ron and Hermione were standing. There had seemed to be hundreds of them. Tall, and dark, and seeming to glide rather than walk.

Dementors. At Hogwarts. Ron had glanced anxiously over to Harry and noted that though his friend's face was tense, his body was poised for fighting. A handful of Gryffindors who had been enjoying the afternoon sun—Angelina, Lavender, Fred and George, Ginny—and one or two students from each of the other houses had hovered nearby, clutching their wands out in front of them.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" Harry had been the first to act.

Ron had watched with amazement as the silver form of a large stag had shot out of Harry's wand and charged towards the lake, making several Dementors recoil. Some first and second year students, who had earlier been too frightened to move, had fallen to the ground just feet from the terrible creatures, whimpering. Ron hadn't had time to think

twice—he'd only tried the Patronus spell twice before in class, and both times, his wand had produced little more than a fine mist. But he'd caught a glimpse of Hermione's hair out of the corner of his eye, taken a deep breath, and summoned the happiest thought that he could.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" he had cried, pointing his wand in the direction of a group of Dementors. They were closing in on a small boy who had been swimming and was now curled up very close to the edge of the lake.

Something had shot out of Ron's wand. He had squinted in astonishment, trying to understand what he was seeing. It had appeared to be ... some sort of man ... Ron had not been able to discern who or what exactly. Even more astonishing—his Patronus had worked. The Dementors had backed away from the boy.

Hermione had run around to attempt to drive off others from another angle. Several other students had been shouting and sending an array of silver mirages out of their wands, some fully formed, and others, light, white clouds. The Dementors had fled from the counter-attack to congregate in the center of the lake. The boy who had crawled out of the water sat up on the bank, rubbing his head—Ron had recognized him as Colin Creevey's little brother, Dennis.

"Here comes Dumbledore!" someone had shouted. Ron had swiveled to see the Headmaster, flanked by Professors McGonagall and Figg, hurrying across the grounds. He had exhaled with relief, certain that if Dumbledore were present, no further evil could befall the school.

Most of the other students had seemed to agree—they'd stopped in their efforts to drive off the Dementors, and had retreated to the castle. Hermione had crept up behind Ron and taken his hand. Everything had gone still again, and warm, and calm. Colin Creevey had hurried toward the lake, reaching for his brother.

Then the ground had begun to shake.

It had been slight at first, just a tremor, but enough to force Ron and Hermione apart—enough to cause Colin to tumble backwards and fall. The Dementors had slowly begun to glide back out towards the edges of the lake, though this time, they had attacked no one. This time, they had seemed content to sit and wait.

"*Why would they wait like that...?*" Hermione had barely whispered, looking at Harry.

"*I don't know.*" Harry's voice had gone hard. Grim. He'd held out his wand and advanced slightly, as if already certain of what he was about to see.

Ron had just noticed that his own hand was shaking when a loud, terrible, shattering noise had permeated the silence. He and Hermione had barely kept their feet as the earth had begun to tremble more violently. Harry had been standing next to Dumbledore, who had advanced ahead of McGonagall and Figg.

Meanwhile, Dennis Creevey had begun to disappear into the lake, as the earth around the water had crumbled beneath him. Dumbledore had raised his wand with a powerful cry, but the ground vibrations had suddenly increased tenfold and thrown him sideways—the Headmaster had stumbled. Dennis Creevey had slipped beneath the lake's surface. Ron had raised his wand to do something, as had Hermione and Harry, but none of them had been powerful enough to Summon a living person from such a distance. Colin had screamed, scrambled to his feet and run helplessly to the water's edge, dodging Dementors and shouting his brother's name, and the trio had followed him, trying to stay on their feet, ready to jump in, if they had to.

And then had come the explosion. If it were possible for water to burn, Ron would have sworn that the lake water had turned into fire and rolled towards them. To his horror, Ron had seen the bodies of several Merpeople rise, lifeless, to the lake's surface, where they bobbed among grimy stone chunks that must have belonged to mer-village huts. Something in the water itself must have been exploding, knocking other, smaller life forms clear out of the lake. A Grindylow had hit Harry on the shoulder. Ron had seen a shiny, pink and grey mass break apart and drift towards them, until he'd recognized with disgust one of the tentacles of the giant squid.

The lake had then appeared to be drying up, although Ron could not have said how the water was disappearing. Dumbledore had fought his way to his feet and taken aim at the evaporating water, no doubt attempting to rescue Dennis, wherever he was. His fellow professors had assisted him; Harry, Ron and Hermione had followed at his heels.

But before any spell could succeed, something tall and terrible had emerged from the pit of the lake, soared forward, and landed on its feet in front of the headmaster.

At once, the vanished water had rushed back into its place, and Ron had heard Hermione give a fearful cry next to him as Dennis Creevey's body had surfaced among

those of the merpeople. Colin had given a strangled shout—Ron had seen Professor Figg step forward and drive the Dementors away from Colin with her large, catlike Patronus. Keeping one hand on Colin's shoulder, she had sent a cord shooting from the end of her wand, which had wrapped itself around Dennis's waist and then retracted, bringing Dennis's body to shore.

Ron had looked on, shaking and stricken, never having seen a person killed. He had seen Cedric's body, already dead. But just moments ago, he had seen Dennis Creevey slip below the waves. And he had been unable to stop it. A feeling of guilt unlike any he'd ever experienced had overtaken him, as he'd watched Colin struggle with his sobs.

"It's him."

Harry's voice was barely audible, his breathing was ragged, and his eyes had fixed on something other than the sickening sight of Colin, weeping at the water's edge. Harry had stared for a moment, then started toward Dumbledore, his wand out.

Professor McGonagall had leapt forward and grabbed Harry. With a move that proved her much stronger than she looked, she had forced him behind her.

High, cruel, unnatural laughter had filled the air.

Ron had turned to see what Harry was watching, and for the first time in his life, he had seen Lord Voldemort. His blood had run cold and he'd shivered violently, unable to believe it. Harry had never described Voldemort to him—not really—but it had seemed to Ron that Voldemort was exactly as he had pictured him. Pale skin stretched flat over a snake-like skull, slitted eyes as red as blood, and long, narrow, frightening fingers, playing idly on a wand that had indeed looked identical to Harry's. When he had spoken, his voice had been a hiss.

"Dumbledore. Esteemed Headmaster..." Voldemort had bowed. *"It seems that you were unable to secure your domain as well as you would have wished..."*

Ron had instinctively moved beside Harry, who had continued struggling to be let loose from Professor McGonagall's grasp. Hermione had moved to his other side. Harry's teeth had been clenched, and he'd only been fighting McGonagall with one hand, because the other had been clutching at the red scar on his forehead.

For the first time, Ron had remembered that Ginny was still outside with them. He saw her in his peripheral vision, standing a little ways behind Harry, a look of terrified determination on her face.

Voldemort, however, had for once not seemed interested in Harry. A sinister smile had flitted across his face, and he had concentrated totally on Dumbledore.

Ron had not been able to see Dumbledore's face. But he had been able to envision the Headmaster's expression when he'd heard him say in a calm, clear tone; *"Welcome back, Tom."*

The Dark Lord had grimaced. *"Tom does not exist—he has been dead for many years. But I thank you for the greeting."* His eyes had flickered briefly to Harry, and he had given his wand a lazy flick. *"Crucio!"*

Harry had fallen to the ground between Hermione and Ron, curling up into a ball, his face contorted with pain. Professor McGonagall had dropped to her knees to repel the curse, and Ginny had rushed forward, all while Voldemort had lifted his wand once more and let out a chilling laugh.

"Harry Potter," he had hissed. *"How like your father's screams yours sound..."*

Dumbledore had raised his wand and Voldemort had done the same.

"...but I will spare you. Yes... You may live until I have dealt with your protector."

"I see you have finally found your way in?" Dumbledore had asked, his voice deadly calm. He had seemed unaware that anyone was present except for himself and Voldemort.

*"It was surprisingly simple to extract the basic information from Igor Karkaroff. Foolish man. He thought if he told me then I would welcome him back—just as you thought that sealing your lake after Durmstrang's departure would keep your school safe. Had you forgotten how much more potent my power is than your simple *magic* tricks? Your nobility—your refusal of true power—has been your downfall."*

Ron had taken that to mean that Karkaroff was now dead. He couldn't say that he had been sorry to hear it.

Dumbledore had gestured slightly with his wand. *"Has it indeed, Tom? Are you here to challenge me to a duel?"*

Ron had been amazed at Dumbledore's even tone. There had been no trace of fear or anger. The headmaster had sounded as though he had been starting up another Sorting Feast, instructing them all not to wander around the hallways in between lessons. His voice had been almost... amused.

"Do you think," Voldemort had spat, "that I stopped studying and paying attention when I left Hogwarts? I remember with utmost clarity the day that you defeated Grindelwald. A sad day indeed. I had just joined his followers. In a way, I suppose that you did me a favor—his death left a convenient gap for me to fill. I have become greater than he ever was. I have found the entrance to Hogwarts." His eyes had gleamed with a terrible power. *"And I have not come alone."*

As if summoned by his words, the army of Dementors, hundreds-strong, had glided from their places around the lake's shore, gathering hungrily behind Voldemort in a dark mass, focusing their hooded, faceless bodies toward the Hogwarts castle.

"They'll storm it," Hermione had whispered, beside him. *"They'll Kiss everyone."*

Ron had known she was right. If they had been able to bypass Dumbledore, then the Dementors would have infested the castle in seconds, to feed on the joy of every student there. To feast on all their souls. The students and teachers would never have been able to drive back so many.

Voldemort had held up a long, white hand, stopping the Dementors just behind him. His shining red eyes had fallen on Dumbledore again, and narrowed. *"I remember the duel. I remember how you defeated Grindelwald. I will not make myself vulnerable, as he was. Fight me, old man, and my army will have your school. Your pupils."* He had laughed softly. Horribly.

"Then why don't you just kill me now, Tom?" Dumbledore had asked quietly, tucking his wand away into his belt and waiting.

Professor McGonagall had drawn a sharp breath and got to her feet. Ron's own breathing had gone harsh and ragged. Harry had crawled to his knees, and stood up unsteadily.

The smile that had crossed Voldemort's lips had been perhaps the most awful thing that Ron had witnessed all day.

"I shall," Voldemort had breathed. A moment later, he had pointed his wand directly at Dumbledore's heart. *"Avada Kedavra!"*

There had been the flash of terrible green light that Ron had always heard about. A pang of sick dread had thudded in his gut. Hermione had cried out, and a loud yell of disbelief had erupted from Harry. In an instant that had seemed to encompass hours, Dumbledore had fallen, blank-eyed, onto the grassy slope that lined the lake, the corners of his mouth upturned, slightly. Ron remembered thinking that he had looked victorious, even in death.

But victory had been Voldemort's. He had followed the collapse of the Headmaster's body with gleeful eyes, before looking up at Professor McGonagall and smiling coldly. *"Stand aside ..."* he had whispered, shifting his gaze behind her, to Harry, who had been staring with fixed horror at Dumbledore's dead body. *"Come forward, Potter."*

Harry had stood dumbly for a moment, seemingly unable to process what had happened. But he had finally raised his head and stepped forward, wand out, ducking away from Ron and Hermione—from Ginny and Professor McGonagall—as if determined to take the blow alone.

Voldemort had raised his wand.

And he and his Dementors had disappeared as if the ground itself had been a Portkey.

Ron had blinked, confused, and looked to Hermione, who was looking hopefully from side to side. *"Is it a trick?"* she had whispered.

"WHERE ARE YOU?" Harry had demanded, shouting into thin air as if convinced that Voldemort still stood there, before him. *"SHOW YOURSELF!"*

"He... Mr. Potter..." Professor McGonagall had been unable to speak clearly, at first. Slowly, she had walked the few necessary steps to Dumbledore's body, where she had dropped to her knees, placing both hands on the sleeve of his purple and silver robes. *"You-Know-Who is gone."*

"How do you know he is?" Harry had whirled. *"Where has he gone?"*

"Your Headmaster...had anticipated an attack. We had no idea of knowing how, but he prepared the school for... the eventuality..." Professor McGonagall's voice had been thick and uneven. She'd continued to choke out an explanation, her fingers tightening on Dumbledore's sleeve until that her knuckles went white. *"In the event of his... death..."*

Beside Ron, Hermione gave a small sob.

"...Professor Dumbledore had cast a very powerful spell... on himself."

"Himself." Hermione had grabbed Ron's hand. *"Expuli Inimicus,"* she'd murmured. *"The Expulsion Curse... A person can cast it on himself and a specific area so that if he comes to harm, all his enemies will be driven instantly to the other end of the earth. Wizards and witches used to use it on themselves and their homes during the great persecutions,*

to prevent harm to the rest of their families, should they have been killed in their beds. It's very dangerous and generally backfires, but I suppose..." She had drawn breath and gripped Ron's hand tighter. *"I suppose Dumbledore could have used it on himself and Hogwarts, in case something like this..."*

Harry had looked at Professor McGonagall, his face pale, his mouth set. *"So his death expelled his enemies, and he knew that it was going to. He asked to die so that the Dementors wouldn't have the school. So that Voldemort wouldn't have me. That's why he died, and that's where they've gone. Isn't it."*

It hadn't been a question.

Professor McGonagall's breath had caught—so sharply that, this time, Ron had expected her to burst into tears. But instead she had turned and given the three of them a sober look. *"Yes, Miss Granger. Expuli Inimicus. In death, he has protected this school more fully than he could have done, alive. He has sacrificed himself, Mr. Potter. You... are quite right."* The professor had shut her mouth tightly, clearly struggling with her emotions, and then had somehow managed to speak in her usual, authoritative tone. *"Prefects, please take your students to their houses."*

Ron and Hermione had turned numbly, but immediately, to begin doing whatever they could, to help. Harry had stood stock-still.

"Miss Johnson, please attend to Mr. Creevey. Take him to the hospital wing. Be respectful of his brother's body."

Angelina had gone to Colin at once. Colin's chin had trembled violently, but he had risen to his feet, and together they had begun the work of floating Dennis's body toward the school.

"Arabella, if you would... help me." Professor McGonagall's steady voice had begun to fail. *"I must... get him inside. I must seal the entrance, in the lake and this time we will use whatever means necessary. Please find Severus...ask him to come here..."*

But before taking her instructions, Professor Figg had gone to Professor McGonagall and put a hand on her comrade's shoulder, tears shining in her eyes. *"We have lost him, Minerva,"* she had said softly. *"We have lost him."*

Professor McGonagall had crumpled.

It had been unreal. Unbelievable. Dumbledore had seemed invincible. Ron could hardly remember anything about the rest of that night. There were flashes of Colin Creevey, returning to the dormitories to pack his things and leave Hogwarts forever. Hazy memories of Ginny, sitting in the chair beside Harry's, both of them staring dully into the fire.

Ron came to his senses and looked at his feet, away from the lake. He felt unpleasantly warm, and extremely dizzy—the mere memory of that day was still a trauma for him. So much death in one place. They'd gone home for the summer, and it had been months before he'd had another normal moment with Hermione, and that was just before her parents had been attacked. And then, the following Christmas, he himself had been kidnapped. And now she was going to run off and study where he couldn't follow. It never ended. He bent down, grabbed another stone, and hurled it angrily into the water.

"You need to stay here with me," he muttered fiercely, saying to the empty air what he had wanted to say, earlier. "All that shit is *over*, Hermione. We've been through *enough*. I want it over, and I want you here, and you don't *have* to leave, so you ought to *stay*."

"I'm not staying."

Ron wheeled around, heart hammering. Hermione stood right behind him, her eyes bloodshot but her expression calm. Ron's first instinct was to take her into his arms and comfort her, then destroy whatever had made her cry. Just as quickly, he remembered that she had most likely been crying because of him. Or rather, because of her own decision. *She* was the one who wanted to leave. If she was crying, she only had herself to blame for it.

"I'm not staying," she repeated, taking another step towards him, "but I'll be back. It's only for four months. It's just like summer holidays."

"We haven't been apart for the last two summer holidays."

"Even more reason why this shouldn't be a problem."

Ron didn't care if that was true. They had done almost everything together for years, along with Harry. Ron thought it might help to mention that.

"What about Harry?"

Hermione looked taken aback. "What *about* him?"

"He's not doing too well right now, if you haven't noticed. It's not exactly the best time for you to go gallivanting all over the world!" Ron cringed inwardly as the words came out of his mouth. His

mother had said the same thing to Bill, he remembered, when Bill had left for Egypt.

The look on Hermione's face was a good indication to Ron that he'd probably said the wrong thing. She threw up her arms in exasperation. "Harry is doing just *fine*. Maybe *you* haven't noticed. Anyway, he already knows that I want to do this, and he's *glad* for me."

"You told Harry before you told me?" Ron felt an irrational stab of jealousy. "Brilliant. Bloody brilliant. Why don't you make him your boyfriend instead, since he's so understanding?"

Hermione covered her mouth with her hand and let out a small laugh. This infuriated Ron even more—he couldn't find anything funny about this situation.

"It's not like I'm leaving *forever*, Ron," she finally managed. "It's not even a very long time."

"Four months isn't a long time? Well thanks a lot. Now I know what you think of me."

They stared at each other intensely for a few moments, and then Hermione whispered in a voice that sounded unusually high-pitched and quiet; "Ron—you *do* know how I feel about you, don't you?"

He shrugged.

Hermione took a step forward so that she was standing a foot away from him. She reached up and uncrossed his arms, grabbing one of his hands in each of hers. He didn't resist, but he looked stubbornly off to the right, trying to appear very interested in the foliage of a nearby oak.

"Ron, look at me."

He turned his head slowly until their eyes locked, and his breath caught in his throat as her eyes connected with his. This was all he wanted—her, standing here with him, looking up at him like this, her hands in his. And he wasn't going to have it.

"I love you," she blurted out. Several tears escaped her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. "Why can't that be enough? Why can't you just let me do this? I'm here until the day after Lavender's wedding, so we have a week together, and then I'll be back in December. I'll come back, and we'll be *fine*."

Ron felt his ears turn red at her words. They didn't say they loved each other very often—although it was understood every time they looked at each other. He wanted to say that he loved her too, but that wasn't what came out of his mouth. "I'm sure that's what Percy thought when he decided to come home and it didn't exactly turn out *fine* for him, did it?"

Hermione glared at him through her tears. "I can't change who I am, or what I want, or what my *parents* are going through. You know me. You *know* I'd be miserable if I didn't do this. Don't you care about any of that?"

"Yeah," said Ron vaguely.

"Listen," said Hermione, firmly, "Do you want to spend this last week fighting? I'm *going* to go, but I'm going to feel terrible the whole time if I know that you're unhappy. Is that what you want for me?"

Ron shrugged again. Part of him did want her to spend those four months being miserable. A corner of his mind, however, was already filling with admiration for Hermione and what she wanted to do. It was pretty brave, really, leaving England in search of some woman hidden away on an island. Hermione was very determined, and, he realized, very loyal. She hadn't given up hope of curing her parents, even when the staff at St. Mungo's told her that it was hopeless. He was already starting to feel like a prat for not being more supportive. Still, he wasn't quite finished.

"You should have told me *first*. You should have told me more than a week before you're leaving," he said in a rush. She opened her mouth to reply. "No—I've got to go get ready for work," he finished, cutting off whatever she'd been about to say.

Hermione swallowed, and her bottom lip disappeared into her mouth as if she would start to cry again. But she didn't. "Fine," she whispered. "Go on."

Ron walked past her, back toward the house, but he couldn't bring himself to leave without another, kinder word. "Stop by later?" he asked hopefully, turning back. "I'm closing up early tonight."

Hermione remained with her back to him, looking out at the lake. "I don't think so," she answered quietly. "I've got some reading to do and some maps to study."

"Right." Ron knew that he was supposed to say something here, something warm and encouraging. He couldn't think of anything. Briefly, he wondered if Hermione knew where to find that Time-Turner that she'd used in her third year. Then again, he didn't know what he'd change if he could go back a few hours.

"Coming back to the house, at least?" he asked, holding out his hand.

Hermione didn't turn. "No," she said. "I'll be up a bit later. I think I want to be alone."

Ron stood watching her for a few more moments. She wanted to be alone and she wanted to

go away. In a week. Feeling entirely helpless, Ron finally turned and began to slowly walk toward Lupin Lodge.

A/N: Thank you, JediB, for letting us borrow your Sunseed reference, which you use to such good effect in your awesome "Dreams of Yesterday".

A/N II: To the attendees of SQUKNY: Many a good time has been had in New York City; none, however, has been so good as ours. Thank you for being so completely awesome, for traveling such long ways, for wearing your Gryffindor scarves with pride, and for making it all seem just a little... realer.

A/N III: Much thanks to our patient beta-readers for catching mistakes and pointing out holes and making us think very, very hard.

Physical distance is nothing, between kindred spirits.

— CHAPTER FIFTEEN —

The Bar Brawl

It was the first time since Goldie had employed him that Ron really hadn't felt like going to work. Usually, Ron looked forward to his shifts—he enjoyed the rowdy, sometimes terribly rude customers. He liked having free rein to crack at them once they were lit. And he loved the sense of freedom it gave him to have a payslip at the end of every week. Sometimes Hermione visited and watched him work, which made him nervous and happy at once. Sometimes Harry showed up after Quidditch practices and kept him company. Even Ginny came down for a butterbeer, once in awhile. In any case, Ron's shifts at the pub usually flew.

But tonight he was just plain tired. He wanted to get back to Hermione and try to clear things up—their earlier fight about the Thinker had him badly rattled, and he needed to see her face. Not to mention that the whole house had been up all night with Remus, on edge about Ginny's attempt at the Wolfsbane Potion. Ron was still in shock that she had really pulled it off. Everybody said it was the most complex potion on record, and Ginny had made it work. That was definitely incredible, and Ron was more than a little bit proud. But his natural brotherly pride was mixed with deep personal annoyance, and Ron couldn't get rid of it however he tried. His little sister was making complicated potions, while he worked in a pub. There was something dead wrong about that.

"Hey, Red—two more this end."

"Got it."

Ron shook off the haze in his brain and sent two shots of fizzing purple liquor to the end of the bar with an expert flick of his wand. He then craned his head over the buzzing crowd of the Snout's Fair to check that Lipsett wasn't getting in over his head. There were a few customers whom he'd grown accustomed to keeping an eye on, and Lipsett was one of them; his wife had hauled him out of the bar on Ron's first night at work, whacking Lipsett over the head with his own broom when he'd claimed to be sober enough to ride it home. Thankfully, at the moment, Lipsett seemed to be in high spirits, and Ron went back to filling the shouted orders that were coming from all sides of him.

"Two pints of stout—"

"Double gillywater—"

"Tankard of mulled mead, here."

Ron worked to keep up, not too tired to remember that mead had been Hagrid's drink of choice. He always wanted to give the mead drinkers a tankard on the house, and sometimes, when Goldie wasn't watching, he did. But not tonight. He wasn't in a great mood. Ginny had been successful with the Wolfsbane Potion. Not that it was a bad thing, but now Ginny was one more person with something to do. She had her lessons coming up, and Remus needed her for something important—he even wanted to keep Ginny at Lupin Lodge for the school year, and teach her himself.

"Six butterbeers."

The voice broke into Ron's thoughts. He looked up. It was Lipsett, and he was swaying precariously from left to right. "Nothing doing," Ron returned flatly. "Here's one. If you can make it back to the bar after that, we'll go for two."

"Ruddy pain in the arse you are, Red. Bet you were a pain in the arse prefect, too. Bet you were a right bugging pain in the arse Head Boy as well."

Ron groaned. He took a lot of flack, in this crowd, for having held those particular titles. It had been pretty great of Hermione to brag all about it to Goldie, but Ron had a feeling that Goldie had then deliberately leaked the information to a few of the Snout's more loudmouthed patrons. It was now a joke among the regulars, and Goldie laughed as well, watching Ron from his seat at the far end of the bar. Goldie had quite a sense of humor—fortunately, so did Ron, though he was feeling snappish about it tonight.

"Yeah I was," he told Lipsett evenly, waving him off the bar. "Sit down or I'll owl your wife. Next order—"

"A butterbeer, two shots of Liquid Curse, and a Lucky Lady."

Ron sent the butterbeer on its way, set up two shots of the green liquor that had given him his own first taste of drunkenness, and pulled a bottle of ruby red liquid from the shelves behind him, grinning for the first time all evening.

"If she's with you, MacMillan, how lucky can she be?" he cracked. The crowd guffawed good-naturedly as the subject of the joke turned a bit red.

Jimmy MacMillan had been in Ginny's class; he lived in the next town over and was constantly at the Snout's Fair with his friends. They seemed to be attempting to have a summer much like Ron's own; everyone was trying to forget the war and move on. It had to be doubly hard for Jimmy, Ron knew, because his older brother Ernie had been working for the Owl Office in Diagon Alley and had lost his life in the blast last year. Ron knew with unfortunate precision just how difficult it was to weather a loss like that, but he pushed the memory of Percy away before he could begin to think about it.

Jimmy grinned. "Just give me the drinks and shut it, Weasley. I've got a *friend* to get back to."

Ron plunked the shot glass onto the wooden bar, and followed Jimmy's gesture across the pub. At the large, round table in the back, he saw another of Ginny's old classmates, Andrew Quinn, who had his wand stuck out the window and was listening intently to whatever was outside. Two pretty girls that Ron didn't know sat watching Andrew and whispering. The blonde laughed and the brunette shook her head at Andrew in what looked like exasperation, though she was smiling.

"Which one's yours, then?"

"Blonde," Jimmy replied happily. "Nice looking, right?"

Ron opened his mouth to agree, and then thought of Hermione. His mouth fell shut. "No opinion, mate. What's Quinn doing with his wand?"

"Some kind of recording thing, he's into experimental music..." Jimmy trailed off, a stupid smile taking over his face as he gazed toward his friends. Ron noted that the blonde girl at the back table was smiling rather stupidly back at Jimmy. He knew that sort of smile pretty well, and usually it would have put him in good spirits—it reminded him of the way he and Hermione looked at each other. Tonight, however, it unsettled him. Hermione wouldn't be looking at him like that for a long time coming. She was taking off to live with some stranger. She'd made her big decision. She was going to be a Thinker.

And he was going to be here, working at the ruddy pub.

The last thought irritated Ron more than any of the others, somehow, but he did his best to shake it off. Expertly, he magicked the drinks into the air, then swatted Jimmy's shoulder with his wand. "Get back to your girlfriend, you sap," he ordered, with false cheerfulness.

Jimmy flushed a bit. "Sod off," he muttered. But he wasted no time following Ron's direction—he flew the drinks back to the corner table and settled quickly next to the blonde girl.

"Next?" Ron called into the noise of customers. He hoped nobody would answer. He was quickly slipping from tired to exhausted and had hoped to close up early, though it didn't look likely to happen. The crowd wasn't thinning at all.

There was a loud, throat-clearing noise from the far end of the bar. "Give me two butterbeers, six shots of Liquid Curse, twelve Lucky Ladies and a bottle of Madman. And hurry it up, you. I'm damned thirsty."

Ron raised his eyebrows incredulously, wondering what crazed lunatic would order so much liquor at once. At the same time he felt a stab of serious irritation. It got his back up when customers told him to hurry, and it only made it worse that he couldn't do anything about it because they were customers. That had been one of Goldie's first lessons to him. Never fight with the customers.

"Going as fast as I can," Ron said mildly, turning toward the other end of the bar with a forced smile, and searching out the demanding patron among the crowd.

"No you're not. You're slower than a History of Magic class. Goldie must've been mad to hire you."

Ron felt himself about to say something less-than-polite, regardless of the rules. But the remark died on his lips when he saw who was taunting him.

"Oy, shut it, Sirius."

Sirius grinned, and leaned back in the stool next to Goldie's. He looked to be enjoying himself immensely, and Ron found himself cheering, slightly. He liked Sirius a lot—they had similar natures.

"Where's the respect for your patrons and elders? I'm Mr. Black to you—and get a move on those

drinks.”

Several customers’ heads swiveled toward Sirius when he announced his last name, and more than one of them sidled quickly away from the bar. Sirius looked after them, his expression unreadable.

Ron merely snorted. “Right. I’ll give you the Madman, but believe me, you don’t want twelve Lucky Ladies.”

Sirius turned back to him and laughed. “Just one’s enough for you, then?”

“You have no bloody idea,” Ron sighed, shaking his head. He retrieved a Madman from beneath the bar and sent the bottle hurtling toward Sirius with force he wouldn’t have used normally. But it was fine in this case—Sirius caught the bottle deftly and downed it in two gulps, exhaling loudly and grinning again.

“One more, if you’ve got it.”

“Think fast—” Ron sent the next bottle hurtling, and this one did several intricate aerial flips on its way to Sirius’s hand.

“You’re learning bar tricks!” Sirius noted, clearly delighted.

Ron’s ears went warm. “One or two yeah. Hang on.” He quickly fulfilled the orders of his remaining customers, and headed down toward Sirius to begin cleaning the bar. “Maybe everyone’ll take the hint,” he said, gesturing to the crowd with his towel. “I need to get home and get some sleep.”

“I think we’re all overtired,” Sirius agreed, pulling his eyebrows together. “Last night was very difficult.”

Ron nodded, not sure that he wanted to get into the subject of last night. “Yeah,” he said noncommittally. “That was tense.”

“It was.” Sirius drew deeply at his bottle, and set it down. His face was solemn. “Actually, I came to apologize.”

“Huh?” Ron frowned at Sirius in surprise. “What for?”

“For last night. I was... not myself. I get extremely worried about Remus. I took it out on Ginny and it wasn’t necessary. I’ve apologized to her already, but as she’s your sister, I just wanted to make it clear with you.” Sirius looked at him soberly. “She did an incredible thing.”

Ron flushed with both pride and immediate irritation. “Yeah she did,” he mumbled. “Anyway, it’s fine. I thought she was mental for trying it, too.”

“She was.” Sirius dragged on his Madman again, and smiled. “But she pulled it off.”

“Just luck, maybe,” Ron offered, keeping his voice neutral.

“Remus doesn’t think so.” Sirius set down his bottle with a decided thud. “She’s a talented girl.”

“Yeah.” Ron looked to his left and saw the brunette from Jimmy MacMillan’s table sitting expectantly at the bar, her money in her hand. He was glad for the distraction. This conversation was getting the better of him, somehow, and he didn’t want it to show in front of Sirius. “Hang on,” he said quickly, walking toward the brunette and spending a lot more time on her order than was necessary. Usually he didn’t let the girls chat his ear off, but she was pleasant and had a few funny things to say about Quinn—and, though Ron hated to admit it, he wasn’t in the mood to talk about how talented Ginny was. Instead, he listened to Quinn’s girlfriend go on about how they’d met in Hungary, avoided Sirius’s questioning gaze, and hoped that something else would happen to keep him distracted. He didn’t have to wait long.

“Find yourself a new girlfriend, Weasley?”

Ron stiffened. The arrogant drawl was instantly recognizable. He didn’t have to turn to know it was Malfoy.

A thousand things went through his head at once—but his immediate desire was to pull his wand and strike. His hand moved on instinct, and he only held it down when a second, stronger thought entered his head. He’d promised Hermione. He’d sworn he wouldn’t fight Malfoy, no matter what.

Ron dropped his hand. “Excuse me,” he said to the girl he’d been waiting on. She nodded, shot a bothered look at Malfoy for his comment, and took her drink back to her table.

He turned to Malfoy, willing himself to stay calm, though he could already feel the urge to fight rising in his blood. But the summer was almost over—Malfoy would be going back to wherever he lived quite soon—Ron knew that he could manage a few short days without rising to it. He *had* to manage. He made himself take a deep breath, and forced out a few polite words.

“What can I get you?”

Malfoy laughed. It was a raucous sound, totally unlike his usual, cool laugh. Instead of his predictably lazy, controlled movements, his entire posture drooped heavily. He leaned on the bar and fixed a stare on Ron, raking his fine blond hair back from his face. “Now this is more like it.”

Ron drew himself up to his full height, stepped up to the bar, and glared across it at Malfoy. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

Malfoy laughed again, and Ron smelled liquor on his breath. It definitely seemed he'd had a few drinks tonight—Ron had never seen Malfoy pick a fight without his bodyguards around, but he was certainly picking a fight now.

"It's just like my father always said. You're behind the bar and I'm in front of it." Malfoy smiled. "Get me a drink, Weasley."

Ron flexed his fingers, and clenched them tightly into balls, talking himself down from the battle he itched to initiate. *Don't rise to it. Don't rise to it. Hermione, Hermione, Hermione...*

"What are you drinking, *Draco*?" Ron worked to say the name calmly, worked not to spit it with all the venom that he felt.

"Oh, are we on a first name basis? I don't think so. Get me a glass of wine. Now."

Ron had to turn away from the bar. It was either that, or knock Malfoy's head in with his bare hands. He turned around and stared blindly at the rows of bottles that sat against the mirror behind him, not sure how he was going to get through this without cursing the hell out of something. Or someone. Malfoy's reflection smirked at him as he reached for a glass and a bottle.

"I drink red."

Ron clenched his jaw. *Don't do it. Don't curse him. Hermione.* He shifted his gaze away from Malfoy's image and down the bar, his hands automatically and calmly going to the bottle of red wine, though in his head he was plotting a series of violent movements. In the mirror at the end of the bar, he saw Goldie and Sirius watching him intently. He forced himself to nod at them, then poured the wine and turned resolutely back toward the crowd, his mind racing.

"Fourteen sickles, three knuts," he said, through gritted teeth, putting the glass on the counter in front of Malfoy and barely resisting the urge to toss it into his eyes.

Malfoy glanced disdainfully at the glass. "I suppose there's no point in asking the year," he muttered, then withdrew a money pouch, searched in it, and let a galleon fall from his fingers onto the bar. It spun crazily a moment before landing, and he laughed again, his pale, pointed features flushing a dull pink as he swilled his glass and sniffed its contents contemptuously.

"Have the change, Weasley. I don't need it."

The insult was old, but it hit with direct force. Ron's hand moved recklessly to his wand as it so often had in school, his mouth opening on an ugly hex. Malfoy grinned, settling his hand on his own wand and waiting.

Ron nearly growled with impotent frustration—he wanted to hurt him, to make him suffer, but Hermione's protests were clear in his mind. *Don't do it. Don't give him the satisfaction.* Ron forced himself to release his wand, pulled a shallow breath, withdrew the appropriate change from behind the bar, and coolly settled it on the counter.

"No, thanks."

"Take it." Malfoy took a swallow of wine. "God knows when you're going to see money enough to have a life. Working in this place? You'd think someone like you would take a lesson from his parents and aim a bit higher."

"It'd be hard to get higher than Minister of Magic." Ron's heart flashed with fierce pride. He knew he was rising to the bait, knew Malfoy wasn't worth the trouble. But he couldn't let it pass. It was too good, being able to throw that fact at Malfoy. It was about damn time. And Malfoy was getting into dangerous territory now—touching on the Weasley family. Ron noticed that most of the patrons at the bar had backed off, and were watching the mounting tension between the two of them with curiosity and trepidation.

"That's a position of convenience and you know it," Malfoy whispered, leering. "He's only in there because it's a mess. Must be just like living in your house."

Ron shivered, and clenched his hands so tightly that they hurt. "Get some new material, why don't you, Malfoy."

"The truth hurts, doesn't it, Weasley? Your father is a fluke success. He's nothing but a murderer. And your mother—"

"My dad's no murderer." Ron's voice was loud, suddenly, and his hand was tight on his wand, ready to pull it at any moment. He'd kill him. This was instinct. This was three years of war. This was what he had always expected it to come to with Malfoy.

Malfoy's eyes were suddenly bloodshot. "And what would you call him?" he whispered. "My father is dead."

A hush fell across the people who were left in the bar. Ron's eyes didn't leave Malfoy's, but he could feel the energy of the watching crowd. Everyone in the wizarding world knew at least

something about the events that had ended the war. Everyone knew that Arthur Weasley was the acting Minister of Magic, and that Lucius Malfoy had been a feared Death Eater—they might all have put the situation together by now. Ron didn't know how much they'd figured out. It didn't matter. They'd know it in a minute.

"Your father..." Ron gritted his teeth, hard, "...tried to kill mine first. You were there, you know what happened." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sirius stand.

"I saw my father die," Malfoy insisted thickly.

"You saw him set a Killing Curse on my father—you *saw* it."

"I saw my father *die*."

"He was aiming for my *sister*, Malfoy—were we all supposed to stand and watch?"

"He was aiming for *Potter*," Malfoy spat, swaying on his seat. "Your sister was making a fool of herself, as usual, she should have got out of the way."

Ron gripped the bar with both hands. "Your dad was a Death Eater." His voice was very low. "It's nobody's fault but his if that curse came back on him." Ron knew that to say these words about someone's father, even to a person like Malfoy, was cruel. But he didn't care.

"It was your damned *father's* fault," Malfoy slurred. His eyes were so narrow that they'd almost shut, and he seemed to be struggling against some display of emotion. "And you—the *three* of you. You and Potter and your girlfriend. With your spells."

Ron suddenly realized just how drunk Malfoy must be. He was showing incredible weakness—and insecurity. Even jealousy. Ron relaxed his grip on the bar. "Go home, Malfoy. You're drunk."

"Don't give me directions!" Malfoy hissed. "Get me another drink."

Ron shook his head. "You're over your limit," he stated flatly. "No more."

"And you're acting like that obnoxious Peter Prefect you used to be related to," Malfoy said softly, smiling. "Sad about him, isn't it?"

Ron mouthed soundlessly, trembling with fury. Even Malfoy had never struck so low. "His name was Percy," he whispered. "Have some respect."

"Why should I be more respectful of your dead than you are of mine? Peter was careless, that's what my father—"

Ron reached across the bar with lightning speed and seized Malfoy by the collar of his robes. The two young men faced each other over a mess of spilled wine, wild eyed and furious, barely even breathing.

"You show my brother *respect*," Ron barely managed. "Your father was *there* when he died. You want to talk about murderers, you bastard—"

Malfoy's hands seized Ron's collar a moment later, and Ron felt a jolt of massive surprise. Malfoy had never stood up to him—not physically. Not alone. Not like this.

"It was Wormtail that killed your brother," Malfoy whispered. "My father had nothing to do with what happened to Peter—"

"Say his name wrong one more time—"

"Hard to keep you all straight, Weasley. Shocking your mother even noticed one of you was gone."

Ron knew that he had to let go of Malfoy. He had to. His mind screamed at him to pound the enemy with his fists, to rip out the blond hair, to put his wand to Malfoy's chest and finish it all. But behind the blinding anger in his brain was the echo of Ginny, telling him how frightened Hermione was that he'd do something rash and get taken away—that Hermione could bear anything but that. And then there was Hermione's face—the livid fear in her eyes whenever there was a chance that he might fight.

He wasn't going to do it. He wouldn't hurt Hermione over Malfoy.

"Go home," he managed hoarsely, releasing Malfoy's collar with a violent yank and tearing Malfoy's hands from his own shirt. "Get out."

"Scared?" Malfoy laughed. "Don't know what to do without Potter?"

"Get *out*."

"Or do you want me to get out of the way so you can get back to the new girlfriend? Does that Mudblood you sleep with know you're having it off with someone else—"

There was a rush of noise and air. In seconds, Ron had released Malfoy, grabbed the bar, and hurled his body over it, barely landing on his feet. He heard glass shatter on the floor, but didn't heed it. Blood pounded in his ears. His wand was in his hand and he held it at the ready for a duel. Malfoy stumbled from his stool and pulled his own weapon, pointing it out at Ron.

They circled each other slowly. Ron felt there was nothing—*nothing*—stronger than his hatred at that moment. His heart pounded furiously, sending a rage of blood through every vein. Over

Malfoy's shoulders he saw Jimmy and Andrew rise from their table, hands on their wands. The girls they were sitting with did the same. Even Lipsett got up, suddenly quite sober, and pulled his wand. Goldie watched Ron intently, and Sirius stood still, waiting, ready to step in at any moment. The other patrons had backed against the walls.

Malfoy didn't seem to see any of it. He looked delighted, as though he knew he'd tapped successfully into the sorest spot of all. Ron could barely bring himself to speak. It was bad enough that his brother was dead. Bad enough that his father had been accused of murder in public, and that his own pride had been wounded. But Lucius Malfoy had been entirely to blame for the attack on Hermione's parents, and everybody knew it. Malfoy knew it. Malfoy had given his sick father the idea in the first place. And now Malfoy was smiling, and opening his mouth to throw another taunt.

I'm not going to do it. I won't. I won't...

Malfoy took careless aim with his wand and spoke. "Careful, Weasley... Don't get sacked... How will you support that orphaned bitch and the next litter of paupers—"

Ron lunged. He had forgotten his wand, he only wanted to attack—attack—he had almost hurled himself onto Malfoy when he felt a strong grip on his arm. His body was yanked unceremoniously back from the fight before it could even begin and he stood, his back against the bar, panting.

"That's enough." It was Sirius's voice. Ron was still shaking with rage—he lunged toward Malfoy again immediately but Sirius blocked him. "It's all right."

Ron looked into Sirius's face and knew it was over. He was at once incredibly incensed that he wouldn't be allowed to finish this himself, and incredibly grateful that someone was going to stop him from committing a serious crime.

Malfoy, in the meantime, had whirled to look at Sirius. His face, which had been flushed with alcohol and anger, turned pale. He had apparently been unaware that Sirius Black was present in the room. The bitter anger in Malfoy's face didn't waver, but he took several steps backward, slamming into a table. He raised his wand unsteadily.

"*Expelliarmus*." Sirius didn't even raise his voice. Malfoy's wand flew across the bar and Sirius held onto it. "Get outside."

"I vill show him de vay out." Goldie was out of his seat and walking toward Malfoy, who was cowering and clearly humiliated. The old barkeep reached out a stout hand to guide the young man to the door by his shoulder, but Malfoy threw him off.

"Don't *touch* me," he hissed, stumbling along the table toward the door, blond hair falling in his eyes.

Ron followed in Malfoy's inebriated wake. He followed until he'd backed Malfoy up against the wall beside the door to the Snout's Fair, and held out his wand, not quite sure what he wanted to do. He only knew that the glittering hatred in Malfoy's eyes was real, and that his own matched it.

"Ron." Sirius's voice was steady behind him. "Don't. It's all right."

"I know it. I'm not going to do anything."

To his own surprise, he found he was telling the truth. He still ached to inflict pain on his enemy, but the fight was over. Malfoy was shaking. Ron muttered a spell in his direction, making him flinch in terror—but it was nothing more harmful than a Sobering Charm. Ron then turned and handed his wand to Sirius, not trusting himself to carry it. "I'll take him outside," he announced flatly.

Sirius took the wand and nodded.

Ron turned back and pulled open the heavy wooden door; Malfoy stepped sideways and backed through it, practically falling backwards down the stone stoop and into the cobbled road.

"Give me my wand, you son of a *bitch*," Malfoy demanded, when he'd steadied himself. "Go and get it from that escapee and give it back."

Ron felt a sick lurch of anger, but he was unwilling to start up again; he turned back to get him his wand and get him out of there.

He wasn't expecting to be punched in the side of his head.

It was a blind side—Malfoy waited until Ron had turned just a fraction past his line of peripheral vision, then struck. Having no wand, he'd struck with his fist.

The blow was intensely painful. Ron staggered to the side, wondering if some bone was being shattered—he felt several cracks and tasted blood in the ridges of his teeth. He'd bitten his tongue. There was also something dripping down his cheek. Ron knocked into the outer wall of the pub, his head ringing with pain, his eyes glazing over. He looked dazedly at the faces that were pressed against the window, watching him—Jimmy and Andrew and Sirius—but their faces seemed to swim in his vision before disappearing from the window. Ron imagined they were running for the door, but he didn't have time to consider it. The moment he steadied himself and turned to face his

assailant, he was forced to act.

Malfoy's fist was coming back toward him—it was within two inches of his nose, and sailing at light speed. Ron had no time to think; he raised his arm to ward off the blow, swinging his fist in a wide arc toward Malfoy's arm in an effort to beat it away. A loud crack told him he'd connected with something. A thud told him that Malfoy had hit the ground.

Ron gaped in disbelief at Malfoy's unconscious form, sprawled on the cobblestones, then slowly reached up and felt the side of his head with his hand. His temple was a mess of sticky wetness, and he drew his fingers away, wincing. Blood glistened on his hand, in the moonlight.

"Hermione," he mumbled. Ron stared dumbly from his hand to Malfoy, whose fist was lying slack and seemed to be sticking off his arm at a bizarre angle. Ron wondered if the bones he'd felt cracking had been Malfoy's.

Sirius barreled through the door with Jimmy and Andrew on his heels. Behind them, Ron could see the customers in the Snout's Fair straining for a look outside, while Goldie ushered them all back to their seats and took up Ron's post behind the bar. Jimmy shut the door; he and Andrew stepped out into the street, their eyes on Malfoy's crumpled form.

Sirius made straight for Ron. "You all right?" he demanded.

Ron looked dazedly away from Malfoy's pale hand and glanced at the blood on his own. "He asked me for his wand, I turned to go in and get it, and he tried knocking me out..." He turned his face so that Sirius could see the damage.

Sirius let out a low whistle. "He did a number on you," he mused, raising his wand and muttering a spell that Ron recognized from his episodes under Madam Pomfrey's care as a Disinfecting Charm. Ron's temple stung, and the throbbing in his head worsened. A moment later, he felt the wet trickle begin to run down the side of his face again; he raised his hand and felt more blood.

"Don't know how he broke the skin," he mumbled, gazing down at Malfoy's fist. "What do we do with him?"

"Take him back to Lewis's house. Let his mother deal with him." Sirius did another quick spell, which stopped Ron's blood from flowing on his face, then turned to Andrew and Jimmy. "You two," he demanded. "You witnessed this?"

"Yeah," they answered together, and Quinn raised his wand. "Recorded it, I think. I don't know if I got anything."

"But what did you see?" Sirius pressed.

"Malfoy punched him," Quinn answered at once.

"And Ron punched back to block another hit—self defense—I saw it from the door," Jimmy finished.

"All right," Sirius said gravely. "Good to know, just in case. You can both go in—we've got it from here."

Ginny's old classmates shot a last, dubious look at Malfoy's body before going back into the pub.

Sirius magicked Malfoy's body off the ground in order to float it up the road and back to his summer home, and Ron watched, not sure what to feel. Hanging in midair, slack and defeated, Malfoy looked suddenly vulnerable and sad. His right hand still appeared to be twisted. Ron pointed the injury out to Sirius, who came around and examined it closely.

"Broken. In several places."

"What, on my head?" Ron asked in surprise, reaching up to gingerly touch the sticky, throbbing wound.

"Hardest bone in your body." Sirius let out a snort of contempt. "He's a fool. And here's the reason you're bleeding." Sirius lifted Malfoy's ring finger. The moonlight glinted on the ornate, golden ring he wore, which bore a large 'M' in Gothic script. It was ostentatious and wet with blood, but was clearly a costly heirloom. Sirius dropped Malfoy's broken hand without regard for its injury and surveyed him for a moment with open disgust before turning and waving his body up the street ahead of them. "Let's go." He motioned to Ron.

"My shift's not over," Ron protested vaguely, gesturing to the pub.

"Yes it is. Come on."

Ron followed Malfoy's body alongside Sirius, thinking about the fight, and the gash on his head, and the ring that had probably belonged to Lucius. He couldn't help remembering how Malfoy's eyes had been bloodshot when he'd first mentioned his father's death. Ron shuddered at the thought that it could easily have been Arthur Weasley's death on that day. This fight could easily have taken place in reverse—and something close to pity surfaced in him. It might even have been real pity, if it hadn't been for Malfoy's ugly remarks about his father. His finances. His family. Percy. He'd had to go and say those things about Percy, who was dead and couldn't fight for himself any longer.

And Hermione. Ron shuddered again, but this time it was out of loathing and hatred. Nobody

called Hermione anything. The words Malfoy had used were unforgivable—calling her an orphan, as if it wasn't his fault that she was one. Calling her a... Ron didn't even want to remember the words, though they came back and rang loudly in his mind anyway. He trained his eyes on the sleek, pale blond head that hovered just a meter ahead of him, and silently told Malfoy how lucky he was to be alive.

"I would've killed him." Sirius's voice broke into Ron's string of mental threats. His tone was mild and even, but Ron sensed the truth behind it, and he turned his head to give his honest answer.

"I—I think I was about to."

"That's why I stopped you. He's not worth twelve years in prison." Sirius stopped walking in front of Lewis Manor's wide, manicured lawn, and looked straight at Ron. "Not much is."

"Hermione is." Ron felt a burn in his face, saying those words aloud on the dark, quiet street. But they were true.

Sirius smiled briefly. "Her life is. Absolutely. But that wasn't at stake."

"Her parents—Percy—"

"I know. Like I said, I'd have killed him. Especially at your age."

Ron returned Sirius's focused gaze, but was not sure what to say. He couldn't possibly understand what was behind those words, coming from a man who had spent twelve years in Azkaban. Ron didn't feel nearly equal to him. It was odd, standing out here with Harry's godfather, the powerful wizard who had served at the head of the Order of the Phoenix, having a conversation of this magnitude.

So he shrugged it off. "Guess we'd better get him inside."

Sirius looked at Ron a moment, his eyes very distant. He shook himself and turned his gaze toward Malfoy's inert shape in the air. "I'll deal with his mother. You go do something about that cut before it gets any more revolting."

Ron snorted, and felt his temple, which was a congealing mess. "Thanks a lot."

Sirius grinned. "See you in a few minutes." He walked up the path toward the massive front doors of the Lewis house, driving Malfoy's body before him. Ron headed up and across the road to Lupin Lodge, hoping for a dark house and a sleeping Hermione. He needed to get this blood off him. He opened the door and went in, listening for voices, but it seemed quiet enough. Making as little noise as possible, Ron went down the hall and cut into the front room, going straight for the stairs.

"What the hell—"

Ron spun to see Harry, his face a shock of concern, his mouth hanging open.

Harry stared at the wound on Ron's face, then raised his voice again. "What happened? Weren't you at work? Was there a fight?"

"Yeah." Ron shifted uneasily. If the last thing he wanted to do was to face Hermione, the second-to-last was to tell Harry he'd been in a brawl with Malfoy. He had no idea how Harry would respond to the information.

"Who started it?" Harry leaned forward in his chair, his book abandoned. "Do you still have your job and everything, or—"

"Malfoy," Ron blurted, not wanting to do a whole wind-up. "He came in and said a lot of—you know—and I didn't want to get into it, but he wouldn't let up."

Harry was already on his feet, his wand drawn. "Where is he?" His voice was dead calm.

Ron shook his head quickly, wishing he hadn't said anything. "It's fine—you don't have to—"

"He's not going to get away with this crap anymore, we're too old. He's lucky we've let him to himself all summer." Harry headed for the hall door, his stride determined.

"He didn't get away with anything!" Ron insisted, blocking Harry's way. "I knocked him out cold. I'm telling you he's unconscious."

"Yeah?" Harry stopped and searched his face.

"Out like a light. He got a swing at me, first—" Ron gestured to his head, "—but it looks worse than it is."

"What d'you mean a swing? Did he hex you?"

"No, Sirius had his wand. He punched me. The cut's from this big ring Malfoy wears on his finger."

Harry made a sound of disgust. "So you Stunned him?"

"No. Sirius had my wand, too. Used my bare hands."

Harry stared at him a second, and then, almost in spite of itself, a slow grin crawled across his face. "You slugged Malfoy."

"Yeah." Ron felt a grin twist at his own lips.

"And this was in the pub?"

"The street."

"And he just-fell over?"

"Dropped like a stone."

"Damn." Harry gave a short laugh and shook his head. "It's about time, isn't it?"

"Definitely," Ron agreed, laughing as well. There had been enough tension tonight, and it was good to have somebody to tell-somebody who loathed Malfoy as much as he did.

"Can't believe I missed it," Harry continued, still savoring a grin. "Where is he now?"

"Sirius is across the road giving him back to his mum."

Harry snickered. "How'd it start, anyway?"

"He ordered me to get him a glass of wine."

"Oh ho. That bastard."

"Language, Harry."

Both boys froze at the sound of Hermione's voice on the stair, and Harry fell to looking slightly sheepish. Ron, however, couldn't breathe. He felt as though he'd been gripped in a vise. He didn't want to turn and look at her. She was going to think he'd been standing here, just laughing about-

"Why is there blood on your face?" she asked, too softly.

Ron met Harry's eyes. Harry communicated silently that he was sorry that Ron was about to get into a world of trouble, then excused himself and went from the room. Ron pivoted toward the stairs and watched him go past Hermione, where she stood in her nightdress, looking down at Ron with a tiny crease between her eyebrows. She watched him for a long time, and he felt there wasn't any point in defending himself until he knew how much she'd heard.

"You promised," she said quietly.

She'd heard enough. Disappointment was crystal clear in her voice, and worry was in her eyes. Ron felt suddenly, unbelievably guilty. He also felt the first flare of anger-she had to understand him. She had to let him explain; she hadn't been there, she didn't know.

"Hermione, listen. He was saying-horrible stuff. *Horrible* stuff. About my dad, and Percy-about..." Ron had been about to say, 'you'. He held his tongue. He didn't want to be asked to repeat the words that Malfoy had called her.

"So you knocked him unconscious."

"No, not like that. First he--"

"He's not unconscious?"

"He was, but wait, let me--"

"Oh, Ron, your face..." Hermione looked at his bleeding temple, distress evident in her expression. She came down two steps and her fingers fluttered up as if to touch him, then dropped again. "You ought to bandage that," she said, her voice shaking a little.

"I will."

"Now, before it gets infected."

"I *will*. But I didn't go back on my word, Hermione," Ron pled.

She studied him with her clear brown eyes. "I know you're angry that I want to go away," she began.

"That's *not* why this happened!" Ron interrupted, furious. "I wasn't taking anything out on Malfoy. I'm telling you, this was just self defense."

"How badly is he hurt?"

Ron snorted. "Worried about *him*, are you? Well, he's hurt-but only because he broke his bloody fingers on my skull. Look, forget it. Don't listen to me, believe what you want. I'm going to clean up." He started up the stairs, going around her to avoid contact.

"I'm only worried about *you*," Hermione barely managed, sounding as if she was on the edge of tears. "I just want to know what kind of trouble you're in, I don't want you to get arrested for some fight--"

"So what if I do?" Ron stormed into the bathroom and wet a towel, flinching when he looked into the mirror. He looked a fright; blood had tunneled into his hair, and dried beneath his eye. Rivulets of it were frozen on the side of his face, and at the place where the ring had cut in there was a deep, dark slice. Quickly he pressed the wet towel to his temple and began to wipe away dried patches of blood.

Hermione appeared in the mirror beside him-he felt her standing close, but stubbornly refused to look into the reflection of her eyes.

"It wasn't just *some* fight," he muttered. "I got *punched*, Hermione, and if I'm stronger than

Malfoy is, that's not my fault. I had to hit back, or get punched again. I have witnesses who'll tell you that it was self defense—not that you care about my side of the story.”

“Let me do that.” Hermione reached for the towel.

Ron jerked his hand away. “I’ve got it.”

“Ron?” Sirius’s voice drifted up from downstairs.

Without another word to Hermione, Ron went out of the bathroom and down the stairs, to hear what had happened with Malfoy. When he reached the front room and met Sirius’s eyes, his heart gave a dark thud; Sirius looked nearly as pale and worried as he had last night, before the Wolfsbane Potion had turned out to be successful.

“What’d Draco’s mum say?” Ron demanded. “Why do you look like someone’s died?”

Sirius flinched. “No one is dead, Ron. But you’d better sit down.”

Ron sat blindly in the nearest chair, afraid to comprehend what was implicit in Sirius’s tone. “What... what’s the problem? He’s just unconscious—I hardly touched him, you *saw* what I—”

“Yes. Nevertheless he has been taken to St. Mungo’s.” Sirius drew an uneven breath and raked both hands back through his hair, and Ron felt a wave of terror so strong that he thought he might throw up. He might even have done so, if it hadn’t been for the pressure of two cool hands on his shoulders and the sound of Hermione’s voice at his back.

“What’s wrong with Malfoy?” she asked in a whisper.

Sirius swallowed. “I took him to his uncle’s. And his mother... well, I don’t particularly like her, but she’s been through a war like the rest of us, and she’s suffered her losses too—so I wasn’t surprised when she started screaming at me to wake up her son. Which I tried to do, but Malfoy wouldn’t respond to any of my attempts to bring him around. That didn’t make sense to me, because I knew you hadn’t done much but knock him backwards, and nothing was injured except his fingers. But then his uncle thought to turn him over.”

Hermione gripped Ron’s shoulders as Sirius continued.

“Apparently Malfoy had a bad landing, Ron. Whatever he fell on must have split his head right open—and I won’t lie to you. It was a pretty bad wound. The M.L.E.S. has already been called, and they’ll already be down at the Snout’s Fair questioning witnesses and picking up evidence, so if it was a rock that did the damage, they’ll have it by now. They’ll be here next, to question you.”

Ron tried to breathe, and found he couldn’t.

It was Hermione that spoke. “But Malfoy’s going to live,” she said fervently. “You said they took him to St. Mungo’s.”

“I think he’ll live,” Sirius answered quietly. “But I’m not an expert.”

Ron opened his mouth to say something about that, but his head spun so badly that he could say nothing at all. He reached up and groped for Hermione’s hands; she immediately caught hold of his.

“Ron won’t go to prison if it was self defense.” Hermione’s voice shook. “He can’t. He said there were witnesses.”

“True.” Sirius nodded. “But there are loopholes in the laws, and we’re going to have to prepare to defend you, Ron. The M.L.E.S. is going to be here in a few moments, and I wouldn’t be surprised if the Daily Prophet was right behind them. But I’ll speak to everyone—you’re not to say a word.”

Ron didn’t think he could have, even if he’d wanted to. He nodded.

“I’m going to represent you.” Sirius took a deep breath, and released it. “And we should be fine. He hit first, there are witnesses to that, and your strike was self-defense. Everything you did was provoked. I can prove that. But there were plenty of people in the bar who heard every word of what you said to each other beforehand, and that won’t figure into this very well.”

“Why not? What was said?” Hermione demanded. “How will it hurt him?”

Ron squeezed her hands gratefully. She was asking every question he wanted to ask, but couldn’t.

“Insults were thrown which will color this as a personal argument,” Sirius explained, shaking his head. “Ron’s strike will be made out, as much as possible, to look like it was done for the sake of revenge.”

“But that’s a lie,” Ron rasped, finally finding his voice. “It wasn’t for revenge, I wasn’t thinking at all—”

“Just let me answer Diggory’s questions, Ron. We’ll work on the rest of it when the time comes.”

“But it won’t even matter if Malfoy...” Ron couldn’t bring himself to imagine that Malfoy had died. He couldn’t say it aloud. “It’d be manslaughter,” he finished numbly. “Won’t matter what the motivations were. Hell, Buckbeak acted on his instincts, and remember—they were going to kill him for it.”

"That was a different Ministry," Hermione argued at once, her voice high-pitched. "That was Fudge and Malfoy and McNair, and that case was tried unfairly—not to mention that you're human. The laws are totally different."

"She's right." Sirius opened his mouth to say something else, but there was a loud rap at the front door that sent both him and Ron to their feet.

"That'll be the M.L.E.S.," Ron managed. "You... Hermione, maybe you should go upstairs."

But Hermione came around to stand before him. She reached up and took his face in her hands, looking as steady and strong as she ever had. "Listen to me. I'm going up to tell Harry and Ginny and Remus what's happening, so they won't come down. Then I'm going to put on my dressing gown and then I'll be right back," she said, her voice quiet but firm. "Just do what Sirius says. Don't say anything—let him defend you." She brushed Ron's hair back from his temple, softly caressing the wound Malfoy's ring had made as she did so. "I believe this wasn't your fault," she whispered, standing on her tiptoes to swiftly kiss him, then disappearing quickly up the stairs.

Ron watched her go, incredibly afraid, comforted only in the knowledge that she was coming right back. It didn't matter if they'd fought, or if they were still fighting. Hermione gave him strength. He squared his shoulders and turned to Sirius, who stood in the corridor, ready to admit the M.L.E.S. into the house.

"Okay," Ron said, letting out a low breath and trying to calm his pounding heart so that he wouldn't look as nervous and guilty as he felt. "Okay. You can let them in."

A/N: Thanks to Vapid, for counseling us on the physical truths about brawling. Everybody go and read Vapid's "Broken Bottles, Broken Hearts".

— CHAPTER SIXTEEN —

Empty Nest

A tap at his bedroom window woke Bill from what had been at the same time a pleasant and unsettling dream. He opened his eyes slowly, half-expecting to see a woman with long, silvery-blond hair hovering outside, but instead he focused on a pompous-looking Ministry owl standing on the ledge. Letting his eyes wander to the watch on his bedside table before putting his feet on the floor, he noticed with a sigh of frustration that the reason it was still dark outside was that it was barely six o'clock in the morning.

After retrieving a bit of parchment and a copy of the *Daily Prophet* from the owl, Bill sat back down on his bed and reached for his wand to break the special “Minister of Magic” seal on the back of the note. He laughed, still not quite used to the idea that the Minister of Magic was, in fact, his own father, and then read:

Bill—

I knew something was wrong when I came downstairs this morning and saw that Ron's hand on the clock was dead center between “Prison” and “Hospital”. There's no way to hide this from your mother—we've got another hour until she goes downstairs and sees it. Get over here and help me figure this one out.

Dad

Puzzled as to what his youngest brother could possibly have done to warrant such immediate attention, Bill unfurled the copy of the *Daily Prophet*. He stared for a moment in disbelief, and then started to laugh so hard that he fell backwards onto his bed. When he had finally calmed down, he rummaged for his robes and prepared to Apparate to the Office of the Minister.

A few moments later, he was being led into his father's office. Arthur Weasley stood in front of the fireplace, talking to Sirius Black, whose head was floating above the flames. Bill cleared his throat and his father wheeled around.

“Ah, Bill! Wonderful. Give me just a second, will you?” Arthur turned and addressed Sirius. “Right, so let him sleep—he'll need his rest. I'll talk to you more about it later. And, thanks Sirius.”

“Not a problem,” Sirius answered grimly. “I'm used to trouble.” With a roar of flame, Sirius was gone.

Arthur Weasley rubbed his hands together briskly and smiled anxiously at his son. Bill noted that his father's hairline seemed to have receded even further, and that there were bags under his eyes, but that he also seemed to be standing straighter and taller than he ever had before. “So, you've read it then?”

Bill nodded. He was about to ask his father what Sirius had to say, when Charlie came bursting through the door, hair wild, eyelids still swollen with sleep, and robes hanging open. Bill rolled his eyes when he saw that Charlie hadn't bothered to put on proper clothes underneath the robes—he was wearing pajama bottoms and his dragon tattoo was still dozing on his chest.

“What's wrong?” Charlie nearly screamed, looking anxiously from his father to his brother.

“Didn't you read the article?” Arthur asked calmly.

“Article? What article? All I got was this note saying that Ron was in trouble. There was no article attached. The owl must have lost it on its way up to the camp.”

Bill thought it was more likely that Charlie must have lost it on his floor, but he said nothing and simply reached for the copy of the newspaper on his father's desk, and read aloud:

**MINISTER OF MAGIC'S SON IN NEAR-FATAL BAR BRAWL
WITH MALFOY HEIR**

By N. Flummery, *Daily Prophet* Staff Writer

Robert Weasley, son of Minister of Magic Arthur Weasley, was involved in a fist fight yesterday evening that left his former Hogwarts classmate Draco Malfoy battling for his life at St. Mungo's.

"No!" interjected Charlie. "Really?"

Bill nodded and continued reading.

Mr. Weasley, a former Head Boy, now employed as a barkeep at the popular Snout's Fair tavern in Stagsden, threw the punch that caused a devastating head injury to Mr. Malfoy.

"They've never got on," reports Pansy Parkinson, another Hogwarts graduate. "And Roland has a terrible temper. His friends were always having to keep him away from Draco at school. We never knew what might set him off."

"Wonder where he gets *that* from," Arthur muttered, motioning with his head to a portrait of Mrs. Weasley on his desk.

"Mr. Malfoy, who, along with his mother, was residing this summer with his uncle, Martin Lewis, is the sole heir to the Malfoy fortune. Malfoy Manor is currently under renovation to restore the damage inflicted during the war. His father, Lucius Malfoy, was killed on the same day that You Know Who went missing.

"These have been extremely difficult times," says Narcissa Malfoy. "Draco has been my rock these past few months. It is impossible to describe the pain and anguish that one suffers at the loss of a husband—and to lose a son! I can barely—" Mrs. Malfoy was unable to finish this statement through her tears.

Although it is now suspected that Mr. Malfoy will live, as long as he unconscious, the extent of his injuries remains unknown.

Amos Diggory, head of the M.L.E.S., assured the Daily Prophet that everything was under control. "We are currently gathering evidence," was all he could be quoted as saying this morning. No charges have been filed as of yet.

Several patrons at the Snout's Fair yesterday evening have come forward to state that Mr. Weasley's attack was an act of self-defense. Since many of the witnesses were under the influence of alcohol at the time of the fight, it is not clear whether or not their testimony may be considered valid.

Arthur Weasley, the interim Minister of Magic, has not made any comment to the Daily Prophet at the time of publication. His son was also unavailable for comment, although it is rumored that Sirius Black, known (cleared) felon, is already representing him.

Bill put the paper back down on the desk and looked at his brother. He couldn't read the expression on Charlie's face at first—he was looking at the floor and shaking slightly. Finding it difficult to believe that his brother would be that upset about a fight, Bill took a step closer and put a hand on Charlie's shoulder. "Charlie? You all right?" he started to ask, but never finished, because Charlie looked up and burst into a loud torrent of laughter.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Bill started to laugh as well.

"Boys!" interjected their father harshly, "Try to exercise a little restraint." They both stopped chuckling for a second and looked at him. But when Arthur's eyes strayed to the headline and he cracked an unwilling smile, they lost it again.

"So," asked Bill, when he had caught his breath, "you don't think this is too serious, do you Dad? Why was Sirius here? Are the Malfoys pressing charges? Was it really self-defense?"

"No official charges yet. Just threats. But according to Sirius, Ron acted honorably. He took Malfoy outside and Malfoy punched him as soon as Ron started to turn his back."

"Bastard!" said Charlie, shaking his head.

Arthur grew serious quite suddenly. "I'm relieved, boys, that you've all grown up so well. And I can't help but know that it's partially my fault that Ron's in this mess now. Lucius Malfoy and I never got on, and what happened during the war didn't exactly help create a friendly atmosphere between our families, now did it?"

He slumped into the large, official-looking Minister's chair and put his head in his hands, groaning loudly. "Your mother has always been afraid that something like this might happen. It sounds like there were enough witnesses at the pub to keep Ron out of serious trouble, and Sirius was just telling me that he's got the matter well in hand, if it comes to court—but it might be a struggle. And if it is... well, Ron's of age. He faces adult consequences."

Charlie looked uncomfortably at Bill, who shrugged, and sat down opposite his father. He reflected that they *were* all grown up now—even little Ginny was of age, and she'd successfully brewed

and administered the Wolfsbane Potion the week before. Bill tried hard to conjure an image of his sister that did not include a smudged nose and plaits, and failed. He could remember when she and Ron had been *born*. He'd already been quite grown up by then—starting his first year at Hogwarts and feeling quite important—and had used to hold one of them in each arm, for pictures. He remembered getting letters about Ron's first word and Ginny's first teeth.

But Ron and Ginny had been some of the most important figures in the war. Bill supposed he should start thinking of them as adults, and resolved to try.

"Well, I'm glad to see that you're all here."

Bill recognized the voice of Rose K. Brown and looked up to see her standing in the doorway. He looked at his watch. It wasn't even seven yet. Did she work *all* the time?

Raising his head from the desk, Arthur straightened and said "good morning" to her. Rose gave Charlie a withering look and tutted, and Charlie immediately fastened the clasp on his robe, but not without winking at her first.

Rose turned back to Arthur. "The *Daily Prophet* wants a statement from you."

"And I'll give them one in a few minutes. I'd rather not speak with that N. Flummery if possible. I'd wager he's using a Quick Quotes Quill from Rita Skeeter's private collection." Arthur pulled a piece of parchment towards him and picked up a quill.

"*She*," corrected Rose, "was in your class at school, Bill—in Slytherin. Remember?"

Bill did remember, and it only made him echo his father's sentiments. "Let Dad make an official statement, but I'd say no interviews or anything. Write it out and one of us can deliver it on our way out."

"Fine," Rose answered. "You can run it by me and I can deliver it and I can talk with Nancy if you'd like. She always seemed to like me. Now, Arthur, I'm sorry for all of the trouble in your family at the moment. I'm here to help however you need me. But I wonder if we could shift gears for just a moment and discuss the situation at Azkaban?"

Arthur nodded and Rose turned briskly to Charlie. "Charlie, did you finish the second set of letters?"

"Yeah." Charlie yawned. "Hopefully we'll get another three riders before too long."

"Don't you have all your dragon riders yet?" Arthur asked sharply.

"Nope, not by a long shot."

"But those Aurors can't hold the Dementors back for more than another two weeks—that's on the outside, according to Moody." Arthur looked at his son with concern. "Hasn't anyone got back to you?"

Charlie shook his head and began to explain. "None of the wartime riders were too enthusiastic about the whole thing. A few of them said they'd be reserve riders if we really needed them. So, we've got me, Mick, my assistant, and three reserves."

Lines of stress appeared on Rose's forehead. "We *have* to get three more, out of all those athletes we listed."

"What athletes?" Bill asked curiously.

Grinning, Charlie said, "Rose here thought it might be a good idea to solicit the talents of a few top-notch Quidditch players."

"Quidditch players?" Arthur grinned. "I bet Ludo Bagman'd do it for you in a heartbeat."

They all laughed at this, and even Rose cracked a smile.

"Bagman was a Beater," Charlie explained. "We narrowed it down to Seekers. They have the skill at diving and maneuvering. Also, they tend to be smaller and lighter than other players, which is a distinct advantage when riding a dragon. *I* was a Seeker."

"Yeah, and you're so graceful," Bill couldn't help observing. "Tell me, was your assistant a Seeker as well?"

"She was," Charlie answered, and suddenly seemed very interested in speaking with Rose. "We sent out invitation letters to all the professional Seekers in Britain, and all the Seekers in trial for league teams—and we sought out a few international players as well."

"I hope we can attract the foreign flyers—it would be *such* good international press." Rose frowned. "Of course, I don't know why they'd want to come all the way to Scotland just to sit on a dragon and get rained on, but given our success rate so far, we figured it couldn't hurt to ask."

"Actually... that's a great idea." Bill wagged a half-joking finger at Charlie. "As long as you didn't send letters to any of the Falcons' players."

"Of course we did," interjected Rose, looking slightly annoyed. "Why not? You never know who might come in useful." She tossed her head and muttered something under her breath that sounded like "Gryffindor prejudice".

"Slytherin politics," Charlie muttered back at once. "It might *look* good to represent all kinds, but I don't trust all kinds on my dragons."

Bill agreed with Charlie; however, knowing that the issue of House distinctions could easily blow up to a full-length debate, he didn't press the issue. "Do you need me right now?" he asked, turning to his father. "I reckon I'll go into work early today. I need to finish clearing triggered curses out of the bottom level of Gringotts where that dragon mucked everything up—" he ignored a glare from Charlie, "—so it's a safe zone by September when that charmer arrives. Can't send somebody down there into all that." Bill rubbed his head, and noticed as he did so that it was exactly the same habitual motion that his father used, when under stress. "If there's any news on Ron, though, just let me know."

Arthur nodded.

"I can go see Mum later, if you think it would help calm her down," Bill offered, turning back at the door.

"Thanks," Arthur smiled slightly, "but I think your mother'd planned to visit Lupin Lodge this afternoon, and help the teenagers with jumpers. Or dress robes. Can't remember—anyhow, she'll certainly be going after she sees the newspaper."

"Oof," Charlie said, shaking his head. "Ron's in for it now."

"Yes," Arthur sighed, glancing at the *Daily Prophet* once more. "Yes, he is."

"Let's work on your statement about that, Arthur," Rose pressed, pulling her chair up to face the desk and pulling her clipboard. "And while we do, Charlie, aside from those Quidditch letters, I want you to follow up every one of the last declined notes with a new one saying that it's really not optional—the Ministry *needs* people. Go find your assistant—"

"Associate."

"—Mr. O'Malley, and finish that off as quickly as you can." Rose turned her attention back to the Minister, leaving Charlie to give incredulous and unflattering looks to the back of her head.

Bill chuckled, winked at his brother, and left the office of the Minister of Magic.

* * * * *

Penelope Weasley had awakened every morning for the past six months in a relatively good mood. It was part of her natural character to be optimistic. But the first seconds of daily optimism were dashed every time she felt the growing bulge in her belly, or looked up on instinct to see the picture of Percy still smiling and waving to her on the bureau. Her heart would lurch and she would remember.

This particular morning, the baby had actually awakened her with its kicking. There was just a month to go, and Penelope was a bit frightened that the baby might never come out. She reached for her stomach and opened her eyes slowly, catching a glimpse of the bureau, and Percy, and she felt a wave of sadness sweep over her as her eyes glanced across the calendar. It was August twenty-seventh. Her anniversary—hers and Percy's. Their first. They had never even made it to their first anniversary. Penelope felt the tears begin to form in her eyes and she pulled the covers over her head, but not before catching a glimpse of Percy's prefect badge glinting in the summer sun that was pouring through the window. Without warning, her mind fluttered back to a time when Percy had worn the badge proudly—when she had first noticed him.

Having been raised in a Muggle household, Penelope had not been used to many things at Hogwarts. She had known that she had been placed in Ravenclaw because she was smart, she had known that the Gryffindors were supposed to be brave, the Hufflepuffs hardworking, and the Slytherins, well, who *couldn't* see what they were like? So she had been quite surprised initially to find out that the Gryffindor prefect with the bright red hair and horn-rimmed glasses seemed more smart than brave, although, she reflected now, in the end the bravery and courage had won out, hadn't they?

Percy had been so cute. Even at fourteen, she had noticed her tendency to be attracted to boys for their brains. Well, after fourteen, she'd only been attracted to Percy, period. She had first spoken to him on the Hogwarts grounds during her fourth year. She had been sitting on a bench outside on a warm day in April, reading an Arithmancy textbook. Percy had strode by her, taking the long, quick steps that always made him appear blustery and impatient. She had glanced up, seen who it was, and had looked back down at her book, blushing slightly. She had known who Percy Weasley was and she'd been hoping for a chance to speak to him. At the last second, however, her will had evaporated, and she had pulled the textbook up closer to her face.

She had heard Percy walk by on the path, and the next sound was that of a throat clearing. He'd asked if he could sit down. She'd nodded. He'd asked her questions about Arithmancy—he was also studying it, but he was a year ahead of her. He had seemed to her to be a bit lonely

and she couldn't understand why—she had found him charming, and he'd made her laugh. He'd told her how appalled he was that his younger brothers seemed to be constantly in trouble at Hogwarts, "*Honestly, you'd think that people would use common sense,*" and she had told him about her younger sister, a Muggle who, at age twelve, sneaked out of her parents' house every other night to go dancing in the nearby town. They discussed how hypocritical it was for Arthur Weasley to go around breaking the rules of his own Muggle Protection Act left and right and she had told Percy how her father worked for an environmentalist organization, yet insisted on driving everywhere, no matter how close. They had discovered much in common, and by the time he'd escorted her up to the Great Hall for dinner, she had been smitten.

Penelope groaned under the covers. Something that sounded like a pan being thrown onto a stove resonated through the house, louder than usual. A moment later she could smell frying bacon from downstairs, and her stomach recoiled against the unwelcome smell. Molly Weasley had been insisting that she eat it every morning, "I always ate it when I was pregnant and look how my children turned out." Penelope rolled her eyes—she wondered if bacon was somehow the secret ingredient for red hair.

Percy's hair had been the most subdued of all the Weasleys. Also, his freckles had been almost nonexistent. All those years of studying indoors while his brothers were outside practicing Quidditch had definitely had an effect. Only a handful of freckles had managed to develop—a smattering on his hands and on his cheeks. They had been very light, but she had noticed them. The first time he'd held her hand—Penelope's stomach did another somersault—in the prefects' compartment during the ride to Hogwarts, at the beginning of her fifth year. She had reflected at the time that *this* must be one of the reasons he had been placed in Gryffindor. *She* never would have had the nerve to make the first move. True, they had written almost every day during the summer, but still, she had felt extremely shy upon seeing him in person after a two-month separation. She had spent much of the ride staring mesmerized at their entwined hands.

Soon they had been sneaking into abandoned classrooms for stolen kisses between classes. Neither one of them had wanted to sneak out at night, because that would've been breaking their own prefect rules. But they had both agreed that going to classrooms during their own free time was acceptable. People had thought that Percy Weasley was a stick in the mud. People had found him boring, pompous, self-righteous...but they hadn't really *known* him. *Her* Percy had been exciting, passionate, gentle, considerate, and well, of course he had been a bit pig-headed at times, but weren't most men?

Penelope forced herself to sit up in bed. She could hear her mother-in-law talking to someone quite loudly downstairs. She tried to block it out of her mind and bring back that last memory—of kissing in the classrooms—and found herself on the edge of tears again. She put both hands on her swelling belly and tried to calm herself down. *It won't do to think back on him, will it? It isn't going to bring him back...*

Nothing could bring him back. It made her so angry sometimes. Running her fingers through her short, curly hair, she was reminded of the last time that she had been truly angry with Percy. Two months after his death, she had felt a rage towards him that she had never felt while he was alive. She had not been able to sleep that night. Feeling very unhappy, ugly, five-months-pregnant and fat, she had heaved herself out of bed and into the shower. Her long curls had been even more tangled than normal, due to the amount of time she had been spending in bed and her lack of interest in picking up her head for any reason. After struggling with shampoo for about five minutes, she'd shut off the shower and begun ransacking the bathroom looking for a pair of scissors. Percy had loved her hair. It had been beautiful when it was long—light brown, fine, and very curly—it never seemed to lie flat or lose its bounce. *Well, he isn't here,* she'd thought furiously. *So I don't need it anymore. Do wizards really not use scissors? Why can't I find any?*

She had thrown on her robe and stomped down the stairs, out to Arthur Weasley's workshop. After a few minutes she had found a pair of rusty, dull scissors, performed a simple Sharpening Spell, and begun randomly chopping at her curly locks. With each *snip* of the scissors, she'd muttered "*Take that, Percy*". It had been remarkably therapeutic—more so than any amount of tea served up by Molly Weasley, who had given a slight shriek at the sight of Penelope's shorn appearance. Tears had welled in her mother-in-law's eyes, but Molly had recovered herself, told Penelope that it suited her, and had offered to even out the back.

Penelope jolted back into reality at the sound of white-hot sizzling, and the overpowering odor of very-ready bacon. Another noise from downstairs made her jump. Something must have been bothering Molly—either that or the ghoul from the attic was making a social call in the kitchen of the Burrow. Penelope threw her legs over the side of the bed. She was really getting too enormous, and was actually a little relieved that Percy's last memory of her hadn't been in this state, although it would have been lovely to have him put his arms around her and lie and tell her that she would

always be beautiful in his eyes.

No! Penelope stuffed her feet into slippers, ignoring the calendar. She would try not to remember that today was anything special. She was glad that Molly planned to head out to Professor Lupin's house to see everyone. She wanted to be alone and spend the day wallowing in her own grief.

It struck her, as it always did, that the wallowing couldn't be good for the baby. She touched her stomach with soothing fingers, stroking the bulge as if the baby could feel it, and tried to bring her mind around. Perhaps she would try to work. After all, she was still trying to develop an Imprisonment Charm to hold prisoners in Culparrat, and the Ministry needed it now more than ever—her father-in-law had been gently prodding her for weeks to put her head back into the developing process, if she could manage it. Penelope rebuffed Arthur's requests as best she could—telling him that though she had received top marks in school for Charms, she didn't have the skill and knowledge to accomplish such an enormous spell alone. And that was partly true.

But that wasn't the real reason that she couldn't put her heart into it. She had started working on it for Percy's sake and all the research she'd done since his death in February had been extremely painful. Lately it made her physically sick to look back over their painstaking notes and labeled Arthimantic charts, where her handwriting and Percy's were scribbled in tandem on every page. It had been their project. They had been in love already, but it was over those pages that they had come to depend on one another.

A year and a half earlier, before she and Percy had been married, he had been extremely frustrated at the Ministry. Fudge had been losing control and had been asking Percy to carry out near-impossible tasks. One such task had been to recall the Dementors from the Dark Army and set them back at Azkaban to guard the criminals. Percy had realized that Fudge's request was unachievable idiocy, and for the first time had begun to doubt the honor of the Ministry. One evening, mainly in an attempt to calm him down, Penelope had proposed trying to develop an Imprisonment Charm, for use in lieu of Dementors. Percy had immediately taken to the idea. They'd worked on it in their spare time—it had drawn them even closer together, although developing the charm had seemed almost as impossible as catching the Dementors.

One night, late in the spring, they had been sitting in Percy's cramped quarters near the Ministry. They had been bent over the little table that doubled as a desk and eating space, reading up on spells and enchantments that might help them. Occasionally, Penelope had kicked Percy gently under the table and he'd looked up and given her a tight little smile, the kind that he used when he was very unhappy but trying to be a man about it. That night, the smile had contorted into a worried frown. He'd stared at her for a moment as if seeing her for the first time. She'd stared back, curious as to whether something might be on her nose, and she'd resisted the urge to reach up and rub it. Then, suddenly, Percy had pushed his chair back from the table—it had made a loud scraping noise on the wood floor. He'd come around to where she'd been sitting—she'd pushed her chair away as well, ready to jump up in case anything strange was about to happen—but he'd fallen to his knees, thrown his arms around her waist and buried his head in her chest. She'd held him, stroking his hair lightly and waiting for an explanation, and finally he had pulled back, looked up at her with glasses askew, and burst *"I wouldn't be anything without you—you give me strength—and would you please consider marrying me?"*

The emotion that she had felt at that moment had been overwhelming. She had gaped at him, then laughed, then started to cry, and told him that of course she would marry him, what did he think? She hadn't left that night. Or the next night. From that moment on, they'd been inseparable, working hard during the days and evenings, each knowing that the other was there to back them up.

He wouldn't have been anything without her. Would she be able to be anything without him? Where would she get her strength now? Absentmindedly, Penelope rubbed her distended belly, where Percy's son or daughter was rapidly gaining life. She tried not to think about raising the baby, without him. She tried not to think about anything. Every thought seemed to hurt more than the last one.

With a forlorn sigh, she pulled on her dressing gown, paused to study Percy's picture on the dresser, and headed downstairs to the kitchen.

* * * * *

Molly Weasley looked furiously around her kitchen, not sure what else she could bang or throw. A creak from above told her that Penelope was finally awake. It was about time.

Molly took a deep breath and reminded herself that she wasn't upset with Penelope, but with Ron. Regardless, she wanted to get to Lupin Lodge as early as possible today—she had some choice words to say to her youngest son. Two shots of the special sherry that she kept reserved for times

like these had not calmed her temper in the slightest. And Arthur—he hadn't seemed nearly as worried as he should be. How so many of her children had failed to inherit her common sense was beyond her—although it wasn't beyond her when she saw the way that Arthur constantly behaved. *What an example.*

She turned to watch the bacon fry in the pan. Now that the children were all out of the house, she found that she had more time than she knew what to do with. Arthur was busy trying to rebuild the Ministry, George paid frequent visits, and so did Bill and Charlie now that they were in London, but they were grown men and hardly needed the attention that they had as boys. Her relationship with Fred was still a bit strained since he had eloped with his girlfriend Angelina immediately after the war was over, although Molly was trying hard to make things up to him now. She felt an odd need to make something up to *all* her family. She had even finally given in to Arthur's obsession by trying to learn Muggle cooking, and she found that it helped kill time very nicely.

Of course, there was also Penelope to look after.

Molly poured herself a cup of tea and tried very hard not to remember what day it was. She had arranged for the two of them to go and see the teenagers at Lupin Lodge. That had seemed like an excellent plan until she remembered that the purpose of the visit was to see the gowns that Ginny and Hermione had purchased for Lavender Brown and Seamus Finnigan's wedding, in four days.

Still, she didn't think it was healthy for Penelope to be alone today, especially not with the baby's birth so near. Molly lifted her wand and made the bacon fly onto a plate, not in the mood to get up and actually take it out of the pan with a spackula. She wished that she could get through to her daughter-in-law somehow. She and Penelope had never been very close—Percy had moved out of the house during the summer after Voldemort's return, and tensions between him and his father and brothers had been high. He'd brought Penelope home once or twice, but contact had been infrequent.

Molly's first impressions of Penelope had been that she was a very nice girl. Just the sort of girl for Percy. Funny, she'd been afraid that he, out of all of her sons, might have had trouble falling in love, yet he had been the first one to give away his heart, the first one to marry, and the first one to be a father.

Except that Percy would never be a father. The knowledge made Molly feel sick inside, and she only felt sicker, remembering how her son's marriage had begun.

Percy had come over one day in the late spring to tell his mother about the engagement. She had immediately begun to fantasize about planning the wedding that she'd always dreamed of for each of her children, but her son had stopped her short. He'd known that the other members of the family weren't happy with his career choices. Penelope had been living with him, and as far as they were concerned, a wedding wouldn't even be necessary. They'd exchanged modest rings. They'd joined wands. Penelope's parents were Muggles and she didn't speak with them anymore, for reasons that Molly still didn't quite understand.

The couple had just wanted Molly's approval. Molly cringed as she remembered her reaction. She had been furious, and selfish. She'd insisted to Percy that they have an official wizard wedding. Percy had drawn himself straight, chin in the air and chest up, a mannerism that he'd almost never affected in front of his mother, and told her not to be ridiculous. She'd called Penelope a "scarlet woman" and told Percy that she didn't believe that *he* didn't want a ceremony. Her poor boy. He had looked so defeated. He'd scraped at the wooden table with his fingernail and muttered, "Fine, mother, I'll try to talk to Penelope about it."

Molly had drafted a letter to send back with Percy. In it, she'd told Penelope not to worry, that she would take care of everything, and all that they had to do was show up on August twenty-seventh and be happy. She'd picked the date at random—hoping for a cool, late summer day—and a reply had arrived from Penelope two weeks later, thanking Mrs. Weasley, and telling her that they would be there. It had been so selfish, Molly reflected. So selfish, but at the time, it had seemed so important.

It had been a huge undertaking to gather everyone together for that day. Ginny and Hermione had been extremely helpful, and the preparations had helped take Hermione's mind off of her own problems of that summer, at least for a bit. But Fred and George had put up a fight. Why should they attend 'Perfect' Percy's wedding? "*Are you blind, Mum, or did you miss the fact that there's a WAR going on?*" Fred had shouted at her one day. She had applied to Arthur for help, and although she could tell that he was torn as well, he had spoken to the twins and they had eventually given in.

Percy and Penelope had arrived in the morning. Penelope had been wearing simple purple robes and Molly, who hadn't seen her in several months, had reflected that she really was a beautiful girl. Percy had seemed tense, but as they'd sat in the kitchen talking, Molly had noticed Penelope's

left hand disappear under the table to squeeze Percy's, and she'd watched as Percy visibly calmed down. They had seemed to be very much in love, and what more could a mother wish for her son?

The wedding had been so small. Just the Weasleys, Harry, and Hermione. Her boys had been on their best behavior and although there was little laughter, she'd thought that Penelope and Percy had been grateful. Reflecting back on it now, she supposed that they were probably uncomfortable the entire day. The guilt that she felt now was so strong that she felt physically ill.

"Good morning Molly." Penelope was standing in the doorway.

"Good morning dear!" she said in her brightest 'mum' voice. It was difficult, partly because even now, months later, she had a hard time adjusting to Penelope's new short hair. And her daughter-in-law, she noted, was still in her dressing gown.

Penelope slid onto a bench at the kitchen table.

"Tea?" asked Molly brightly.

Penelope nodded. She looked pale and her brow was furrowed. Something was clutched in her hand.

"Bacon?" Molly asked, feeling a bit ridiculous.

Penelope shook her head and mumbled, "No, I'm big enough as it is," and continued to fumble with whatever she was holding in her hand.

"Oh, dear," continued Molly, in what she hoped was a soothing voice, "it's perfectly normal to feel that way. You're not as big as you think you are, and when the baby's born, you'll have your figure back in no time!" She looked down at herself and sighed. "Well. I'm sure you'll have better luck, in any case."

Penelope just shrugged. Molly handed her a cup of tea and pressed, "You should get dressed fairly soon. Since you can't Apparate right now, we'll have to take a Muggle taxi and go to the train station. It's going to take us three hours to get there."

Penelope shook her head. "You go, Molly. I don't really feel up to it today."

"Nonsense!" said Molly briskly. "You'll feel better once you're up and around! The girls are dying to see you!"

But Penelope just shook her head. Molly searched herself for another cheering tactic, but came up with none. It was terrible. Penelope should have been eagerly anticipating the birth of her first child. Percy's only child. Molly had been so excited to hear about the pregnancy from Percy. And when Percy had owled to say that he was leaving the Ministry and coming home, Molly had been ecstatic—not only to see her son and daughter-in-law, but also at the thought that a grandchild would soon arrive as well.

But Percy had never made it home.

Clink! Penelope dropped what she'd been holding onto the floor. It rolled under the table, and in her current state, she couldn't reach it to pick it up.

Molly pointed her wand. "*Accio*," she said briskly, bringing a small, shiny object into her palm where it fitted there, round and cold. She handed it back to Penelope, but gasped when she saw what it was—Percy's prefect badge. Penelope's lip was trembling horribly now.

Molly slid onto the bench beside her and embraced her daughter-in-law tightly. They weren't close, but they would be. Molly wanted to make sure of it. There would come a time when Penelope wanted to move on with her life—she might even meet another man, years down the road. But for now, this widowed girl and her coming baby were all that the Weasleys had left of Percy's life, and Molly wanted to keep her as close as possible. "There, there, dear," she said, smoothing Penelope's curly hair, and giving her a quick, motherly peck on the forehead. "Perhaps you're right about not coming to Lupin Lodge—why don't you just spend the day in the garden? Hermione left some good books on her last visit that I think you might enjoy, and I've Self-Started the tea, so it'll be on all day. You just rest. All right?"

She pulled away from Penelope and looked at her questioningly. Penelope ventured a small smile, nodded, and let Mrs. Weasley lead her out into the garden.

* * * * *

"Mum! I thought you were taking the train!" said Ginny in astonishment. She was sitting at the table in the sunny kitchen at Lupin Lodge when her mother walked into the room. Molly dusted soot from her clothes with one hand and used the other to balance parcels with her wand. Ginny looked behind her. "Where's Penny?"

"She's feeling a bit sad today," replied Molly with a meaningful glance, placing several packages on the table. "So I set her up in the garden with a good book, and instructions to stick her head in the fire if anything happens with the baby. I'll Apparate back in the early afternoon. How are you

dear?"

"Just fine, Mum," Ginny answered shortly. She already knew that an argument with her mother was forthcoming, and she wasn't looking forward to it. She'd made up her mind earlier to talk to her mother about her school plans today, but everything that had happened with Ron in the past twenty-four hours had made her tired and worried—and she knew that his current problems weren't going to help her plead her case to stay at Lupin Lodge.

"Where is everyone?" Molly demanded, looking around. "Ron?" she called.

Ginny winced. "Sleeping, Mum—we weren't expecting you until later."

"Sleeping?" Molly narrowed her eyes. "RON?" she called again.

"Mum... he had a hard night."

"He'll have a harder morning! And where's Harry?"

"I don't know—Remus is in the garden, Sirius is working, Harry's... probably flying? And I don't know where Hermione is at the moment. Do you want a cup of tea?"

"I'd hoped that Ron would at *least* be awake, giving some thought to his position." Molly pursed her lips and sat down at the table. "Actually, dear, I'd love something cold—traveling by Floo always dries out my throat. Pumpkin juice perhaps?"

Ginny magicked a glass and pitcher over to the table, and sat down across from her mother. She couldn't sit for long, however, before she nervously stood up and started pacing around the room, pretending to look busy.

"Ginny, what on earth are you wearing?" inquired Mrs. Weasley, glancing disapprovingly at the worn jeans and Muggle shirt. "I wish you would wear your robes. After all that we've fought for..."

"Mum!" exclaimed Ginny. Obviously her mother was determined to make her *want* to argue. "We didn't fight over *clothing*. This stuff's much more comfortable."

"Your arms are showing!"

"So?"

Mrs. Weasley sighed deeply, "Well, at least you're wearing robes to the wedding. I've brought some things down with me. Bought robes always need some adjustments—I want everyone to try theirs on today so that I can sort them out."

The two of them sat in silence a while longer. Ginny knew what she had to say to her mother, but was terrified to broach the subject and meet with an unequivocal "No".

Mrs. Weasley didn't seem to notice Ginny's nerves; she started talking about Penelope, while glancing towards the door every few moments, in obvious search of Ron. "I'm very worried about her," she admitted sadly, "I know this must be difficult, but she's got the baby to think about now and I'm not sure if she realizes that or not. Maybe it wasn't a good idea to give her Percy's old room. Wait until you see her hair. I can't get over it. It's so short..."

"And to think that you give Bill a hard time for keeping his long. Which do you prefer Mum?" interrupted Ginny wickedly.

Molly gave her a look, and continued. "Don't be smart, Ginny. You'll see it soon enough when you come home next week, and perhaps you can help me to cheer her up while you finish your studies..." Molly looked to the door again. "Which reminds me, I want to talk to Remus while I'm here to see if he has any idea which textbooks are the most useful."

Now was the time to speak, but Ginny found that her voice was failing her. She didn't want to disappoint her mother—but she *couldn't* go home. She just couldn't. She sighed and looked out the window.

Crash! A loud noise startled both of them from upstairs. It was followed by the sound of Ron's voice, "Damn! Bloody hell! Ruddy owl!" and then Pigwidgeon's high-pitched hooting. Ginny stifled a laugh—Pig had learned how to get out of his cage and had taken to greeting Ron as soon as he climbed out of bed in the morning. A few moments later, they heard Ron's big feet padding slowly down the stairs. He stopped in the doorway when he saw his mother sitting in the kitchen.

"Io Mum," he muttered, not moving. He looked a bit frightened. Ginny heard her mother gasp and she felt like doing the same. There was an enormous bruise on Ron's cheek, the line of a healed cut on his temple, and dark bags hung under his eyes.

"Ron" Molly breathed anxiously. "Look at you—what—what—*HOW* could you have got involved in something like this? Did you even stop to—"

To Ginny's surprise, Ron held up a hand and said softly, "I know what you're going to say, Mum. I know the whole lecture. I'm sure you've talked to Dad already so you know what really happened." He winced. "My head hurts," he muttered.

Ginny smirked at him. He certainly did know how to play it for sympathy.

Molly sighed loudly and approached her son. She reached up to look more closely at the cut on

Ron's face and he flinched slightly as she softly pressed her fingers against it. "Have you seen a doctor?" she asked much more quietly than Ginny had anticipated.

"No," Ron answered, wincing a bit as his mother probed at the wound. "Hermione put something on it last night before I went to bed, ow! Mum—" Ron pulled away from his mother, exasperated, and said, "It's okay."

"Well, if Hermione looked at it, then I'm sure she thought to disinfect it. But it looks horrible. *What* were you thinking?"

Ron didn't answer. Ginny felt for him. Her mother obviously wanted to discuss the situation, and at the moment, no good could come of that at all. Ron was more than sorry for the mess, and Ginny knew how scared he was of getting arrested. Yet Molly continued.

"And how does your employer feel about this whole mess? Fighting while you're at work." She crossed her arms and shook her head. "It doesn't exactly look good to start your first job in this way, does it?"

Ginny saw Ron close his eyes and take a deep breath. She stifled a laugh. The situation wasn't funny at all, but she couldn't help wanting to warn her mother that if she didn't leave Ron alone, he might punch her as well.

"It's nearly eleven o'clock, Ron. You should really go upstairs and get dressed."

"I'm dressed."

"Still, there are young women in this house. You should dress properly before you come downstairs."

"I'm wearing clothes."

"You're wearing *pajamas*. Where are your robes?"

"Packed. In my trunk," said Ron, picking up a piece of toast. "I wear these everywhere. To work, to the pitch—in fact, I think I'll wear them to the wedding—"

"Well, if this were *my* house, you'd be wearing your robes every day. It's a sign of respect! People have given their lives so that we can continue to live the way that our kind have for thousands of years..." Ginny rolled her eyes at Ron to indicate that this topic had already been discussed.

"Robes have nothing to do with being magical." Ron grinned as much as he could manage. "Ancient wizards didn't even wear robes, Mum."

Molly opened her mouth as if to protest, but before she could say another word to Ron, Remus walked into the kitchen. Ginny breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of him. With Remus here, she'd be able to talk to her mother without the discussion escalating into a fight.

"Ron's absolutely right, Molly," Remus said, smiling. "The early wizards did *not* wear robes. I'm partial to them myself, but I can understand the younger generation's interest in Muggle clothing. I myself used to quite enjoy wearing blue jeans while riding with Sirius on the flying motorbike."

"Well, Remus, I suppose you *are* right. How are you, dear?" Mrs. Weasley smiled up at Remus and Ginny felt a pang of irritation. This was *exactly* the reason that she was *not* returning home this Autumn. Her mother still considered Ginny and Ron to be small children, and since Percy's death she'd been more overbearing than ever. Ginny knew that her mother wanted to somehow preserve the feeling of a house overrun with youthfulness, and she probably thought that having Ginny back in her old room would make the Burrow feel like home.

But Ginny knew that she'd be stifled in the Burrow without anyone for company but her parents and Penelope, no matter how cozy her mother made it. She hadn't even discussed any of this with Ron. She knew that Ron didn't want to go back home at the end of the summer, and now that he had a job, he had an excuse to stay. Of course, he was of age and could go where he liked—so was she, for that matter—but it wasn't ever a question of what they were *allowed* to do. Her mother was very fond of telling them that they could do whatever they liked, in a tone of voice that suggested otherwise.

Ginny was anxious to see what sort of fight her mother might put up about Ron's staying in Stagsden. She looked at her brother hopefully; maybe he'd say something now and deflect some of the attention away from her own announcement.

Hermione entered the room and Molly rose to give her a hug. Soon they were chatting about Hermione's impending adventure in Cortona. Molly was concerned for Hermione, but, Ginny noted, seemed oddly supportive of her choice.

"You're a smart girl," Mrs. Weasley said brightly, and then frowned as she turned her attention to her son again. "Any thoughts as to what *you'll* be doing at the end of the summer?"

"Expect I'll keep working," grumbled Ron, instantly sounding defensive. Ginny couldn't help thinking that she hoped that Ron would be free to work at the end of the summer. There was no telling how Draco Malfoy might blow the whole situation out of proportion.

"Well, yes, at the pub?"

"Where else?"

"Oh, I don't know. I thought you might want to come home and see about helping your father at the Ministry."

"Doing what?"

"Whatever it is that you're good at dear."

"Thanks Mum, but Harry and I are staying here in Stagsden. We're looking for a house, aren't we Harry?"

Everyone's heads turned to face Harry, who had just entered the room, his Firebolt slung over his shoulder. Ginny saw Ron wink at Harry and guessed that this plan had been hatched in Ron's head exactly ten seconds earlier.

Harry nodded, placed his Firebolt in the corner, and sat down at the table as well, looking extremely tired. Ginny couldn't help watching him; his eyes flitted out the window and toward the Lewis Manor every five seconds. She knew that he'd gone half-mad about what was happening with Malfoy—he had gone stark white, last night, when Hermione had told them that the M.L.E.S. was in the house for Ron. Harry had tried to push past her and go downstairs—it had taken Hermione, Ginny and Remus to talk him into staying out of it, and in the end, it had been Ginny, mentioning to him that the *Daily Prophet* was also in the living room, that had sent him back to his bedroom to brood alone.

"A house?" Molly asked sharply. "Here in Stagsden? With what money?"

"Mum, how many times do I have to tell you that I've got a JOB." Ron's face was getting redder and Mrs. Weasley's eyes were screwed up into tiny beads.

"At a pub! How can you afford a house? And who knows what you may have to pay to get yourself out of trouble!"

Ron ignored her last comment. "I'm a good bartender! Besides, we'd only be renting."

"Harry doesn't have a job."

"He will soon, and anyway, he's independently wealthy, aren't you Harry?"

Harry shrugged and poured himself a cup of pumpkin juice. Ginny looked at him closely. The thought of Harry, as wealthy... he just wasn't. It didn't matter if he was.

"Ginny'll be home to baby anyway, so you don't have to worry about me," said Ron wickedly. Ginny kicked him under the table.

This did seem to calm Molly down a bit, and she smiled indulgently at Ginny. Then she turned to Remus and said, "Yes. Now, Remus, dear, I was meaning to ask you about textbooks."

Remus cleared his throat loudly and looked over at Ginny. Ginny's heart was beating rather frantically in her chest, but she took a deep breath and said, "Actually, Mum, I've been meaning to talk to you about that."

Ron whistled under his breath while Molly looked expectantly at her daughter. "About what? Textbooks? Really?" Molly sounded pleased, "I'm glad that *someone* in the family has been thinking about their future."

Ginny couldn't help but smile at that. She could use it in the impending argument. She took another deep breath, and went for it. "I am so relieved to hear you say that Mum," she started sweetly, "because Remus has offered to give me lessons this year here at Lupin Lodge, and I *know* that'll be a burden off of your shoulders because Remus is a trained professor and it's really a wonderful opportunity."

Molly Weasley's face had turned quite pale. She stared at her youngest child in astonishment, and then turned to Remus, still keeping one eye on Ginny. "Now, Ginny," she said steadily, "you don't want to inconvenience Remus. I'm sure he has other things planned for the year, without having to teach you as well."

"Actually, Molly, it would be wonderful practice for me." Remus gave her a disarmingly apologetic smile. "I've been asked to teach at Hogwarts again when it reopens next year, and I'd love the opportunity to teach this year as well. Really, Ginny would be doing me a favor."

Ginny shot a thankful glance at Remus and then turned to look at her mother, who had now stood up and begun to boil more water for tea. She was surprised to see her mother doing it the Muggle way, rather than using her wand.

"Well," Molly finally said, a bit breathlessly, "there it is then. I shall have to discuss it with your father of course. We need to wait for his approval. I'm not sure how he'll feel about you living in a house with four grown men and no other women. Hermione will be gone until Christmas."

Suppressing a giggle, Ginny replied, "Mum, I grew up with Dad and six boys. I think I can handle it. Besides, Ron and Harry are getting a house."

"Well your father hasn't given permission for that either! And Ron might not be in a situation to do anything for quite a while!" exclaimed Mrs. Weasley, slamming the kettle on the stove and turning to glare at Ron.

"I've got nothing to do with this," Ron warned, waving his hands out in front of him.

"Mum, *please*," Ginny pled, feeling Harry's eyes rest on her, though she wasn't looking at him. "I want to stay. I love home, but... I always went away to school, and I need to be... away at school."

Her mother sniffed. "You do whatever it is that you want to do, Ginny," she said quietly.

Ginny groaned.

"Molly," Remus cut in, walking up to her and looking both nervous and serious. "There's something else you should know. Something that—well, you'll think I'm terribly irresponsible, and you may not want Ginny to stay here after all."

Molly eyed him curiously.

"However, it's fair that you should know," Remus continued, "as it will make you quite proud of Ginny. I do, very much, want to be her professor—but there are other reasons that I would like for her to remain at Lupin Lodge for the rest of the year."

The room went very quiet. Hermione sent Ginny a shining look.

"Yes?" Molly prompted, frowning.

Remus cleared his throat. "She's been able to successfully brew the Wolfsbane Potion," he said slowly. "She administered it to me at the last full moon, and it was perfectly effective."

Mouth hanging open, Molly turned to look at Ginny. "What?" she gasped.

Ginny beamed. She'd never seen her mother look at her in quite that way—not even during the war. "I had help," she began modestly, but her mother cut her off.

"You—the Wolfsbane Potion? Really? But Potions was never one of your good subjects!" Molly looked at once thrilled and terrified.

"I—I know," replied Ginny, giving a little laugh. "I don't know how I did it, but it worked—and oh Mum, Remus will help me study for the Apparition exams and maybe... maybe Dad can clear me to take them early or something—I'm seventeen."

"Your father will *not* give you special permission to do this or that, simply because he is the acting Minister," Molly began sternly, but stopped at once when Ginny held up a hand.

"Well if he *did*, I'd be able to come home on weekends, or in the evenings to see you and to help with the baby..." Ginny wheedled. Of course, she could do this just as easily using Floo powder, but decided to conveniently forget about it for the moment. Molly's face went soft again, and she regarded her only girl with evident pride and distress. Ginny tried to fan the pride. "*Please* let me do this," she begged. "It's the best thing for Remus—and me." She crossed her fingers behind her back.

Molly's eyes were shining brightly, and in one swift movement, she'd gathered Ginny in her arms. "Of *course* you can stay." Her voice was muffled in Ginny's hair. "I'll fix things with your father! Oh Ginny, I'm so proud of you!"

Ginny let herself cling, for just a moment, reveling in having won her battle. She caught eyes with Harry, who was half-smiling at the two of them as though he was about to laugh.

"Mum!" said Ron, after his mother and sister had collected themselves, "I mastered four new Sobering Charms this week! Aren't you proud of me?" He held out his arms to his mother.

Molly released Ginny and glared at Ron. "Have you *seen* the *Daily Prophet* this morning?" she demanded. "If you know what's good for you, you'll start reading some legal books and try to find a way to plead your case. Sirius is much too busy to be taking on this project as well as all his others. Your father says he's doing about a hundred different things at the moment—"

"Sirius is the best one for it," Harry said suddenly, his voice very deliberate and low. Everyone looked at him. Ron gave him a brief smile.

Molly heaved a sigh and turned back to Ginny. "I suppose. But there's nothing we can do about any of that at the moment, so let's go upstairs and try on those robes. No, boys—" she said shrewdly, when Ron and Harry made for the door with the Firebolt between them, "—don't even think of wandering off. You'll need to try yours on as well. Go on, get yourselves upstairs, get them out of your trunks."

Ron rolled his eyes. Harry shrugged. But they both went for the stairs, and Hermione followed, with Ginny at her side. Satisfied that she would get to stay with her friends, and trying not to think too hard about Ron's predicament, Ginny let her mother fuss over her robes and hair, as they all prepared for September first.

A/N: We would, as usual, like to thank all of our beta-readers for their wonderful advice, commentary and help. This one is really for all the mothers out there. Can't live with you, can't live without you <g>, but never forget that we love you!

— CHAPTER SEVENTEEN —

The Wedding

After Lavender and Seamus had said their vows on the sandy banks of the Hogwarts lake, the procession filed out of the school's war-torn gates and down the road toward the village of Hogsmeade. Fred and George had provided plenty of fireworks and several of the villagers opened their doors or windows to see what was causing the commotion. Several older witches and young children joined in the festivities along the way.

The Three Broomsticks had been decorated outside, as well as in. Flowers trailed down the sides of the windows, which, for once, were open wide. Enchanted butterflies of all colors flew in and out and up and down, landing on the guests as they entered the pub.

Inside, the Three Broomsticks looked entirely different from what anyone was used to. Sunlight poured through the open windows. The tables were arranged along the walls, leaving an adequate space in the middle of the room for dancing. In the center of each table was an assortment of food, and Madam Rosmerta stood at the bar, resplendent in ruby-red robes.

"How old do you suppose she is?" Ginny whispered to Hermione as they headed towards their table. "She looks so young!"

Hermione glanced appraisingly at Madam Rosmerta. "She was here when Sirius and Remus were at school, so she must be at *least* fifty. Probably older. Wizards age differently from Muggles, so I can't *really* tell, but I know that Professor McGonagall is almost eighty, and for a Muggle, that would be near the end of your life, whereas she's only halfway through hers. It's amazing. We're really lucky."

Ginny looked back over at Madam Rosmerta, who was busy handing out a pink lemonade and champagne concoction that she had dubbed 'The Finnigan Brown'. "I hope I look that good when I'm her age, whatever it is," she said approvingly, and Madam Rosmerta shot her a sudden, proud smile.

"She heard you!" Hermione gasped.

"Good." Ginny settled down at a table, along with Hermione, Harry and the rest of her family. Together, they dived into the wedding supper, which ended with the ringing sound of silver against glass. Dean Thomas had got to his feet.

"As Best Man, I'm supposed to say something funny and clever about these two idiots over here." He gestured to Seamus and Lavender, who grinned at him amidst the laughter. "But I'm no good at jokes and speeches. Seamus is my best mate, and Lavender's a wonderful girl. They belong together. Have for years. I'll never forget our fourth year, when he asked her to our first school ball—he came up to the dorms afterward, looking pretty shocked, pulled me aside and said, 'She said yes!'" He smirked at Seamus. "I don't blame you for being surprised, Finnigan. I thought she was crazy then, and I think so now."

Everyone laughed, while Lavender kissed Seamus's cheek and leaned her head on his shoulder.

"Congratulations. Cheers!" Dean raised his glass, the whole room drank together, and Parvati Patil got up in the following silence.

"After Seamus asked Lavender to marry him, she came up to our dormitory, lay on her back, and stared at the ceiling for a long, long time," Parvati began somberly, touching her hand to her heart. "It was probably quite good practice for this evening," she added.

Seamus and Lavender went scarlet as the room roared with laughter—the twins howled, Harry laughed so hard he actually spit into his napkin, Ron choked on what he was eating, and though Hermione cried "*Parvati!*" in the most scandalized tone she could muster, she was laughing, too. Ginny could scarcely breathe, she was so overcome with giggles, but she attempted to control herself, as her mother was eyeing all of them in shock.

"She's my dearest friend," Parvati continued. "And I've seen how much she and Seamus love

each other. They were both at Hogwarts, the day Voldemort disappeared.”

The room went silent. Beside her, Ginny felt Harry slide down slightly in his seat.

“We all saw the school today—it’s badly damaged. So were many people. So would Seamus have been, if Lavender hadn’t got between him and a couple of wizards who were trying to curse him when he was down.”

Ginny caught a silent breath. She could feel Harry looking at her.

“He would have done the same for her,” Parvati went on, “and I can’t give this marriage any higher praise. I love them both, and I wish them joy. Cheers!”

Lavender burst into tears, and Parvati sat down amidst wild applause.

“Well, my dears,” Professor Trelawney’s curiously breathy voice cut through the noise in the room like a knife, although it was scarcely pitched above a whisper. “I must say the auras in this room are bright this evening.” She paused for a moment, and when she began again, her voice was slightly tragic.

“Not all as bright as one would wish...no. Not all.” Her eyes skittered over the crowd—several people shifted uncomfortably, and edged away from her line of vision. “But the fates are not always kind, I have found.” She sighed almost perfunctorily, and shook her head. “The spirits have called me here tonight, and I must obey the promptings of fate, no matter how draining it may be for a sensitive like myself. Although I am honored that my dear Lavender and Seamus have deemed me worthy to witness the eternal binding of their souls.”

She paused long enough to raise the glass in her hand. “I do not often partake of the cup that cheers, but on this occasion I find myself prompted by my spirit guides to propose a toast. To Seamus and dear Lavender. I have long known this happy day would come to pass, but I am no less pleased than those without my infallible Inner Eye...” She trailed off again, her enlarged eyes bright and unfocused. “But before we raise our glasses to the happy couple, I wish to give them my gift...a glimpse into their future.” She closed her eyes tightly, and lifted one bony, beringed hand to her temple. The hush over the room grew a bit tense.

“Oh, this should really be pleasant,” Hermione muttered under her breath.

“I part the mists that veil the future and I see...” Professor Trelawney’s brow furrowed, and the billows of her robes quivered. “I see...” Her eyes popped back open. “I see much happiness in your future, dear ones.” She looked faintly disappointed in herself, but rallying, pointed her glass skyward and intoned, “I give you Lavender and Seamus. May the stars always guide them, and the spirits surround them. My best wishes to you both.”

There were audible sighs from the bridal party, but much eye-rolling at Ginny’s table, before the plates were whisked away by magic, and everyone dispersed toward the dance floor. Ginny went toward Hermione, who really looked lovely in her modest red robes, with her hair done up. Ginny told her so.

“Oh, thanks,” Hermione said absently, her eyes on something across the room. Ginny followed her gaze to Ron, who stood with Harry, shaking Seamus’s hand.

“Ladies,” George appeared at Ginny’s elbow with flutes of champagne, which he handed to both girls. “Stand back now, Lee’s about to start the music, and Fred and Angelina told me they were in the mood for dancing.”

“I still can’t believe Mum didn’t kill them, eloping like that,” Ginny whispered, glancing around for her mother, and taking her champagne.

Lee Jordan, who had taken a day off from the WWN, set the music to a lively, romantic tune with a flick of his wand, and Seamus led Lavender to the middle of the room for the first dance. They circled the empty floor, beaming at each other so happily that others were soon moved to join them. Fred did indeed waltz Angelina around the room—three times faster than the beat of the music, but she didn’t seem to mind.

Ron approached Hermione, holding out his hand. Ginny noted a serious expression in his face that she wasn’t used to seeing there—not even where Hermione was concerned. “Dance with me?” he asked simply.

Hermione put her hand in his without hesitation. Moments later she’d settled into his arms and leaned her head on his shoulder, her face against his neck. Ron briefly kissed her temple, then leaned his cheek against her hair and shut his eyes. They swayed in time to the music.

Ginny watched them, feeling hot and cold at once. Rarely did Ron and Hermione express their feelings in public—it was almost uncomfortable to catch a private glimpse of their kind of love—but she couldn’t blame them. It made sense that they would forget the rest of the room, in light of all that had happened this week. The Malfoys had pressed charges against Ron, who was holding onto Hermione with more than his usual fierceness. Hermione’s fingers played in the back of his hair, and she appeared to be mumbling something. Whatever it was, it made Ron sigh out, and kiss her

forehead again.

Ginny wondered what Ron would do, when Hermione left for Cortona. As far as she knew, Hermione hadn't changed her mind about going to the Thinker. She was still supposed to be leaving in two days' time.

"Hi, Ginny," said a quiet voice. She jumped, and noticed that Neville Longbottom was standing beside her.

"Neville!" she exclaimed, reaching to hug him.

"Would you dance with me?" he asked, when she'd stepped back. "I promise I won't step on your toes this time."

Ginny swatted him playfully. "Of course. I want to hear all about what's going on at Hogwarts." She let him lead her out to the dance floor, felt his hand on her waist, and was surprised to find that he had honestly improved. They chatted about the greenhouses, and Neville updated her on his apprenticeship with Professor Sprout without stepping on her toes even once. Ginny found herself laughing freely as he described the look Madam Hooch had given him, when she'd been informed that Neville was going to be made full Hogwarts faculty.

"I don't think she's forgotten my first time on a broomstick," he chuckled. "But then, you weren't there for that—I'd forgotten."

"Oh, believe me, I've heard about it." Ginny exchanged grins with him, then went back to dancing, letting her gaze sweep the room. Inadvertently, she caught Harry's eyes; he was watching her, and the look on his face was undeterminable. Ginny gave a quick, close-mouthed smile, then turned her attention swiftly away, acutely unsettled at the idea of his watching her while she danced with someone else.

In search of a distraction, her eyes fell on a rather handsome older boy at the bar, whom she recognized for some reason. She puzzled over his identity until the music ended, then allowed Parvati to steal Neville, and made her way to the bar.

"I'll take a whiskey and a champagne," the boy said. "And you're looking as lovely as ever, Miss Rosie. Haven't changed a smidge."

Madam Rosmerta rolled her eyes, and put the drinks on the counter. "Go on, you flatterer." She turned to Ginny and smiled warmly. "Ah, students. It'll be a slow year, without the Hogsmeade weekends. Drink, Ginny?"

"Ginny, is it?" The older boy was looking at her curiously. "Well, if you're not a Weasley, I'm not an O'Malley. You'll be Charlie's kid sister."

Ginny bristled, but tried not to show it. "Charlie's my brother, yes."

"Hard to believe, a mad bloke like that, related to a right pretty lass like yourself." He lowered his voice. "But if Charlie asks, I didn't say so." He grinned. "I work dragons with him. Mick, here."

"Oh, of course!" Ginny exclaimed. "I thought I recognized you from pictures. Nice to finally meet you." She stuck out her hand, which Mick grabbed and kissed. She pulled it back, a bit flustered, and caught sight of Harry again. He was still watching her and she turned away a fraction, wishing he'd stop looking at her and just come ask her to dance, if he felt that way about it.

"Pay no attention," said Madam Rosmerta dryly, wagging a finger at Mick. "He's been at that since he was thirteen, he has." She pushed a champagne across the bar to Ginny, who took it, glad for the distraction.

"Well, it's been lovely, girls," Mick said, picking up his whiskey in one hand, and his champagne in the other, "but I've got a bit of a pressing matter to attend to. Be back to torment you in a bit." He turned to leave, but stopped short and grinned widely at the blonde woman who'd just come up behind him, carrying an empty glass. "Well if it isn't my other Miss Rosie." He bowed as much as he could with two fistfuls of liquor, and held out the glass of champagne.

The blonde woman didn't take it. Her jaw dropped. "Mick—Mr. O'Malley—what are you *doing* here?"

"Seamus Finnigan's my cousin, Miss Secretary Privy Rose K. Brown. I was at the wedding, if you didn't notice."

"Well Lavender's my sister! I was *in* the wedding, if you didn't notice."

"Oh, I noticed all right. Those dress robes are a sight better than the Ministry issue." Mick raised an eyebrow, and Ginny stifled a giggle. The robes that Lavender had chosen for her bridal party were quite form fitting.

Rose's cheeks went pink. "Excuse me," she muttered, trying to push past him to the bar.

"Now what's with all that self-sufficiency, when I've got you a drink right here?" Mick demanded, downing his whiskey with one hand and thrusting the champagne flute at Rose with the other. "Bit rude of you to ignore me altogether. Thought you were the well-bred sort. We called you the

Slytherin Sweetheart, once upon a time.”

Rose sighed, and grudgingly took the champagne. “Fine. Happy?”

“Not by a long shot. I’ve got a couple of top secret Ministry matters to take up with you. Serious questions. I mean it.”

“Do you?” Rose asked, lowering her voice and shooting a sideways look at Ginny that told her she wasn’t welcome to listen to the conversation. “Well we can hardly talk here—is it urgent?”

“You’d better believe it.”

“Well...” Rose frowned. “I don’t have my briefcase and notes, but if you need a word in private, I suppose...”

“You won’t need notes for this.” Mick gestured to the back door of the pub. “And yeah, it’d better be in private.”

Rose led the way to the back alley, and Mick followed, shooting a roguish smile over his shoulder at Ginny, and winking. The door banged shut behind them.

“He is *awful*,” Ginny gasped. “That was *not* about the Ministry—poor Rose!”

Madam Rosmerta laughed, and polished a row of empty glasses with a sweep of her wand. “I’ve got a bit of experience watching scenes like that one, and Rose is doing just as she pleases, you trust me. Ah—lovely. My regulars.”

The twins had approached the bar. They seated themselves on either side of Ginny, to talk business with Madam Rosmerta. It seemed that the end of the war had brought about good times, both for the Three Broomsticks, and for Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes.

Ginny listened, feeling quite proud of her brothers for all they’d contributed to the Death Eaters’ defeat. It had been Fred’s plan to exchange the real wands of suspected Dark wizards with the fake ones they’d invented at the Burrow. That had proved a tricky operation, but on more than one occasion, the Order of the Phoenix had seen it successfully accomplished. And the wands hadn’t been the only help—Gigggle Grenades had been one of their first major inventions to hit the market, and had gained popularity at the beginning of the war. But though they’d certainly helped business, they’d actually proved strategically useful. It had been George’s decision to use a stronger version of the Gigggle Grenade during battles, to distract the enemy. Some people had called it a foolish idea, but it had been a brilliant one; true happy laughter was, to the Death Eaters, almost as bad as an Unforgivable Curse. Addle-brained with laughter, Dark wizards had been useless, and what had begun as a party trick had ultimately saved Ron’s life.

“Orders are pouring in for those things,” Fred was saying now. “International demand on ‘em. George here is going to make us rich if he keeps having good marketing ideas.”

“Not like the wands aren’t still selling out,” George shot back. “We take equal credit.”

“Enough.” Madam Rosmerta smiled, pushed tankards at both of them, and pointed to George’s goatee. “Very nice,” she said, with a coquettish smile that made George’s cheeks go ruddy. Although the twins still looked identical in almost every way, George’s chin now set him apart, and Ginny had to admit that it was strangely dashing.

“I think I’m going to start one of those as well!” Fred said brightly. “If it looks good on him, then it looks good on me.”

But Angelina had just approached from chatting with Lee Jordan, and she twined her long arms around Fred from behind, making him jump. “I heard that,” she said sweetly. “And like most witches, I know plenty of good spells for removing unwanted body hair.” She touched Fred’s smooth chin. “Just you *try* to grow one of those things.”

George doubled over with laughter and Fred looked quite put out, although Ginny suspected that he secretly didn’t mind Angelina’s bossing. He allowed himself to be tugged from his stool and back out to the dance floor, as Ron approached the bar.

“My little brother here is your fellow bartender, I’ll have you know,” George said proudly to Madam Rosmerta. “He’s been tending bar at the Snout’s Fair in Stagsden all summer.”

“Really?” asked Madam Rosmerta, amusedly crossing her arms. “Do you think you could handle *this* place?”

Ron looked up and down the bar, and shrugged. “Sure. Why, do you want a break, or something?”

Madam Rosmerta seemed a bit taken aback by the offer. “Well, that... it’s not....” She put her hands on her hips. “Yes, in fact—I feel like dancing. You’ll really mind the bar while I take a spin? What a *love*.”

Ron got behind the counter at once, his ears burning a bit red. Madam Rosmerta flashed him a winning smile, and George got unexpectedly to his feet.

“I’ll spin you,” he offered, grinning at the dubious look on her face. “Oh come on—not a stu-

dent anymore, am I?" he asked, raising his eyebrows and holding out his arm. Madam Rosmerta laughingly took hold of it, and the two of them made their way onto the dance floor.

"Drink, Gin?" asked Ron, grabbing a dishtowel and starting to wipe up some of the spills on the counter.

"Got one, thanks." She turned on her stool, and entertained herself for several minutes watching Colin Creevey, who had come to the wedding with Eloise Midgen, camera in hand. He was so much like a man now that she could barely detect traces of the little classmate who had used to follow Harry about Hogwarts. He adjusted knobs on his camera with practiced ease, and hoisted it up to his shoulder to peer through at Lavender, who was grinning shyly into her bouquet. Colin snapped several pictures, then lowered his camera and nodded.

"Lovely," he said sincerely. "Really, that's going to look great."

"And it's... really going to go in the paper?" Lavender asked hesitantly, looking over at Parvati.

"And why shouldn't it?" Parvati demanded, looking proudly at her friend. "You're perfect. Anyway, I say this makes a *great* story—we all need a little happy news, and it's a nice way to take the sting out of September first." She sniffed, and lowered her voice. "I'm really glad you picked today, for this," she mumbled, hugging Lavender quickly. Colin snapped another photograph, and Ginny smiled to herself. That would be a nice one. "Now." Parvati stepped back and swiped briskly beneath her eyes. "I'll stay quiet for your interview, you go on."

Lavender turned to Eloise.

"How did you choose the date?" Eloise read from her scroll, with much more confidence than she'd had at the beginning of the summer.

"It's the first day of school," Lavender answered promptly. "We've always seen all our friends on the first day of school, and I think our class should always make a point to be with each other on September first. I think it'd be nice, to make that tradition."

"It would," Eloise agreed. "I wish my class had done that. But going on—why did you decide to do the wedding at Hogwarts?"

"We wanted it to be really ours, and I can't think of anywhere more meaningful. Plus which, Seamus asked me to marry him, at Hogwarts."

"Oh, how?" Eloise asked girlishly, forgetting her notes for a moment and gazing wistfully at the bride. "What exactly did he say?"

Colin glanced at her, and surreptitiously turned his camera in her direction. There was a snap, and a cloud of purple, and Eloise looked at Colin in surprise.

"Sorry," he said quickly. "Finger slipped. You were saying, Lavender?"

"Well..." Lavender fidgeted with her bouquet. "I suppose he wouldn't mind my telling the story. It's very simple. We were down behind the greenhouses right after our last-ever Herbology exam—we were just looking at plants," she explained, blushing.

Ginny held back a snort of disbelief. If there was one couple she couldn't believe that of, it was Seamus and Lavender. Still, she leaned her chin in her hand and listened to the rest of the story, feeling rather wistful, herself.

"Seamus asked me if I was still planning to go straight home, after we got back to King's Cross. I said, well, of course. Where else would I go? And he..." She paused, and her eyes focused inward, remembering. "He said, you should be coming to Ireland, with *me*. I want you with me. I'm not saying goodbye to you at some train station."

Ginny's eyes suddenly stung. Eloise sniffled.

"And I was shocked, you know? I said, Seamus—" she laughed, as if the conversation were taking place all over again "—how can I live there with you? Your mum would have a fit. And my dad would have your head, so there's no use in you trying to come to York with me. And Seamus said... well... we *could* do it. If we were married right off."

Parvati let out a little sigh.

"I just remember *looking* at him and then he was suddenly on his knees in the dirt—proposing. And I started laughing, I didn't think he really meant it, but he took my hands and looked so serious that I had to believe him. He said he didn't want to be apart for even one day. He said that, if I'd have him, then he'd do everything I ever wanted." Lavender grinned, a bit wickedly. "So I said yes."

"Just like that?" Eloise asked softly.

Lavender shrugged. "Well, no... not *just* like that. We've known each other forever. And we've been in love a long time. And nobody else really knows... all the... I don't know—truthfully, if he hadn't asked, I might've lost my head at King's Cross and done it for him."

Parvati laughed. "That, I would have enjoyed."

"Oh, you hush." Lavender nudged her. "Were there any other questions, Eloise?"

Eloise dabbed at her eyes and shook her head, making her curls move prettily. "No—that's just the story I wanted. Congratulations. Thanks so much for having us here."

But Ginny lost track of Lavender's reply when Fred wandered back over to the bar, yelling. "Oi! Ron! Angelina wants another one of those Finnigan-Brown drinks."

Ron grimaced. "Does she? I think they're foul."

Fred shrugged. "They're a bit weak, but what can you do?"

"Not a thing, 'cause we're out of champagne. Where's Madam Rosmerta?"

Ginny scanned the crowd but didn't see Madam Rosmerta dancing anywhere.

"Well, never mind," Ron sighed. "I expect she keeps the extra in the cellar. Fred—you want to run down and check for me?"

"Anything to keep my wife happy," Fred answered with a grin, and headed downstairs, just as a light flashed brightly in Ginny's face.

"Colin," she complained, waving purple smoke out of her eyes and sticking out her tongue at him.

He smiled, and took another picture. "That's front page material," he joked. 'Minister's Daughter Pulls Face'. Everything your family does is good for the paper now, Ginny—you'll want to be careful."

"Rubbishy stupid headlines," Ron muttered darkly, behind the bar. "Bugging idiot press, always making things worse. Bunch of slimy—"

"Ron," Ginny admonished. "Colin didn't write that article."

Ron sent a couple of glasses whirling sharply to their spots on the shelves. "I know." He popped open a bottle of Madman and took a swig of it. "Sorry, Colin."

"It's okay. I don't blame you. Flummery's a worthless piece."

"That article was really awfully biased," Eloise agreed, coming up behind Colin and shuffling scrolls in her hands. "Ron, we wanted to know if you'd let *us* write one. Show your side of it a bit more. We've got very friendly material from Jimmy MacMillan and Andrew Quinn already, and we've got a *real* report from St. Mungo's this morning—"

"You do?" Ron demanded at once, gripping the bar. "How's Malfoy? He's fine, right? He's awake? No lasting damage?"

Ginny's shoulders tensed as she waited for the answer.

"Malfoy's up and alive," Colin answered grimly. "But I caught a glimpse of him in his hospital room, from the corridor and you know, it reminded me. Remember how he wouldn't take that sling off his arm for months, after what the hippogriff did to him?"

Ron nodded tersely.

"I'd imagine he's pulling the same kind of stunt. He looked just fine, when I saw him—he was up on his feet and everything. One of the nurses who's had enough of him told me that the only reason he went unconscious in the first place was because he'd had too much to drink. The head injury looked a hell of a lot worse than it really was, because of all the blood. She said it's healing up, no trouble."

"You... that's... true?" Ron asked faintly, relaxing his fingers on the bar. His shoulders sagged in relief. "It's not that bad? He's walking around?"

"He's walking around. Saw it with my own eyes. And—" Colin tapped his camera "—proofs in here."

Ron put his hands over his face and let out a long, low breath. "Okay," he mumbled into his palms. "Okay." When he took his hands down, his eyes were suspiciously red, and he cast about for something to say, but couldn't seem to find words. "Where's Hermione?" he finally managed.

"I'll get her." Ginny touched Colin's shoulder gratefully, then bolted across the room to Hermione, who was deep in conversation with Neville and Professor McGonagall. "Hermione—" she managed.

"Hi, Ginny, just a second—then you do think I can manage the Thinker apprenticeship, Professor?"

"If you are accepted, Miss Granger, then you'll have the opportunity to find that out for yourself—"

"No, I'm so sorry to interrupt," Ginny cut in, "I know it's important, but Hermione, it's Ron—it's news about Malfoy."

Professor McGonagall's mouth set in a line and Neville paled. Hermione forgot to excuse herself from the conversation; she ran straight to Ron. As Ginny watched from across the room, Hermione ducked behind the bar and took his hands. He looked at her mutely for a moment, then bent his head and told her what must have been the good news, because she threw her arms around him and buried her face in his robes, her shoulders shaking. Colin's camera flashed.

"Malfoy's awake," Ginny said faintly to Neville and the professor. "He's out of danger." The two were visibly relieved, and Ginny made her way across the room to tell her mother. Malfoy's being

conscious probably wouldn't stop the lawsuit, but at least it would make Ron's culpability much less severe.

"You're not dancing."

Ginny whirled to see Harry standing off to the side of the dance floor, watching her with an oddly detached, guarded intensity. It startled her for a moment—without realizing it, she'd got quite good at reading his expressions. He hadn't guarded anything from her in several weeks, and it was strange to see him looking like he had used to during the war—fiercely hollow.

"No," she answered, working to keep her voice normal. "I guess I'm not."

"Do you want to?" Harry held out his hand, slightly.

"I—" Ginny began, not sure why she was hesitating. She glanced towards her mother, but decided quickly that Harry needed to know the news about Malfoy more than anyone else. "Okay," she said finally, and put her hand in his.

He gripped it. It was unnerving—she almost wanted him to let go but a moment later they were on the dance floor and slow music had begun to play. Ginny fought a terrible urge to blush, knowing how many people in the room had always been aware of her feelings for Harry, certain that everyone was watching her. She resisted the instinct to look away from the green eyes that were focused directly on her face. This wasn't school. She wasn't a little girl in dress robes at her first dance.

But it was Harry.

He put a tight hold on her waist and grasped her hand in his. Ginny tried not to let it affect her too obviously, but it was like everything with him. Overwhelming. He had never pulled her close to him deliberately like this, and she tried to control how fast her heart was beating. He continued to search her face.

"Malfoy's awake," Ginny blurted, to stop herself from thinking any further about her feelings.

Harry paused in mid-step. "How do you know?"

"Colin was at St. Mungo's this morning, with Eloise." Ginny rushed to give Harry all the necessary information, and Harry held her tighter all the time, looking more and more relieved with every word she spoke. When she finished, he shut his eyes briefly.

"All right," he said quietly, and when Ginny began to sway to the music once more, he followed suit.

They were silent together for a long time.

"Are you having fun here?" Harry asked suddenly, finding her eyes again.

"Yes," she said honestly. "Aren't you?"

"No."

It wasn't the answer she'd expected and it moved her for some reason. "What's wrong?"

"Hogwarts."

It was the most complete explanation possible, and Ginny didn't know how to reply. Softly, comfortingly, she moved her fingers on his shoulder, hardly remembering to keep dancing. "It's being rebuilt," she murmured, shutting her eyes as he pulled her closer. She felt oddly as if he was holding onto her for help, and she laced her fingers into the hand that was holding hers. "Don't worry about Hogwarts."

They swayed another moment in silence and then Harry said abruptly, "Don't you think they're young?"

Ginny wasn't sure why, but the breath went out of her lungs at the question and she had to wait a moment before she was capable of a response. "Seamus and Lavender...? I think..." She felt her tongue become oddly heavy and she wasn't sure she could say the words she needed. "They must... love each other."

Harry made a soft sound—perhaps of derision. "Yeah," he agreed, though he didn't sound at all convinced. There was a silence, followed by another sudden question. "What did you think of their vows?"

Ginny's eyes came open and she looked desperately over Harry's shoulder, trying to maintain her balance. What kinds of questions were these? Why was he asking her things like this? "I thought it was really lovely, what they said." She turned her head to the side, not wanting to give him a view of her face, which she knew was red. When she spoke again, her own voice was lower than she had realized it could be. "Why—what did *you* think?"

But he didn't answer her. He asked another question, instead. "Would you have done it like that?"

Ginny willed herself not to bury her face against his shoulder—she wanted to hide very badly. She *knew* what vows she would make. It was strange, but in a way, she'd already given them to

Harry last year, when she had agreed to take part in the spell that had saved his life. Hermione had made everything very clear to Harry—Ginny's function in the process had been fully obvious. What more could she possibly say to him, if they ever came together in the way that Seamus and Lavender had? What more could she promise Harry than that she would have died for him?

And then it struck her.

"I would have promised to outlive you," she answered honestly.

Harry froze. His fingers went slack in her hand and on her waist. He released her and stepped back, his face pale and his mouth hanging open as if he'd just been punched. "You..." he began, and started over. "What do you..."

Ginny went white. The blood drained from her face; she felt it go. Never had she been so embarrassed in all her life—never had she been so obvious, even where *he* was concerned. She hadn't meant to say those words at all. She hadn't calculated or judged them, or thought about what they would sound like. But there was no way to repeal them, and she'd more or less just admitted that she wanted to spend her life with Harry. Right to his face.

He was still gaping at her.

Both stunned and humiliated by her own transparent stupidity, Ginny quickly withdrew her hand from his limp one and pivoted away from him. The music was still playing, and dancing couples looked at her curiously as she wove her way through them and toward the door, but she didn't care. She needed to get *out*. She pushed the door open and felt the cool air of September hit her in the face like a slap. The door fell shut with a bang and Ginny strode rapidly away from the Three Broomsticks, from the couples dancing, from her brothers, from Lavender and Seamus—from Harry. She didn't want to be near him. She wasn't sure how she was going to bear the embarrassment, the next time they were at Lupin Lodge together.

She passed shops and cottages and eventually found herself in the unpopulated stretch of cobbled road that led to Hogwarts. Hogwarts was a good place to go—there would be quiet, there, now that the wedding was over. And there were plenty of small, private places to curl up and wish things differently, at Hogwarts. Ginny had found them all. The little alcove of trees on the far side of the lake. Hagrid's old pumpkin patch. The overgrown and rarely-used back steps at the bottom of Gryffindor tower. She came to the gate, which was laced with trailing flowers from the ceremony, and flinched at the reminder of the wedding and vows. Some people were allowed to say it out loud, when they were in love.

It was unfair. Ginny had been this way longer than Lavender ever had, and more deeply than Lavender would ever know. She snatched one of the flowers from the vine and pushed her way through the gate, ripping up the petals and letting them fall in the wet grass of the wide Hogwarts grounds, as she headed up the hill. The Quidditch pitch was on her right but she didn't look at it. It was too much Harry's. The lake was on her left and she couldn't make herself look at that, either. She had a sudden memory of Harry, during the second task of the Triwizard Tournament, and how afraid she'd been for him. How invested, even then.

Blindly she marched up the steep slope that led to the lawn outside the entrance steps, and stopped short, as if she'd run into a wall. Indeed, it felt as though a very solid, cold barrier stood here, between her body and the castle, and she almost stumbled backwards from its very present force. Confused, her head whirling from too much emotion, she looked left and right, attempting to figure out if she had managed to come up against some sort of temporary, invisible ward. Perhaps Professor McGonagall had put some up around the school, while it was under construction. It was a long, addled moment before Ginny realized what had made her stop here.

This was where it had happened. Her eyes focused on the place where she had first seen Lucius Malfoy, his wand drawn, pointed at Harry.

This was where she had put herself between them.

This was where she had almost lost her father.

This was where she had heard the words that had ended the most terrible war that the wizarding world had ever seen.

"*EXPECTO SACRIFICUM*"

She had whirled to see Harry standing, his head thrown back, his chest exposed, his wand out, steady, pointing at the place where Voldemort's heart would have been, if he had had one. His voice had rung out into the sky, silencing the battle that had been raging all around him.

The silence had endured for a very long time. The spell had done nothing. And in the dreadful, deadly pause that followed, Voldemort had begun to laugh. Ginny had nearly fainted from the tone of it—careless with cold triumph. Tinged with a wanton disregard

for life. Twisted. Hardened. Death made mortal. And one by one, his Death Eaters had joined him in his laughter, until the Hogwarts grounds had echoed with the dizzying noise of evil, victorious.

"It is finished..." Voldemort had hissed, bringing the noise to a halt, pinning his red eyes on Harry. *"As it was meant to be finished one thousand years ago, between your ancestor and mine."*

Harry had breathed heavily, not backing up, not lowering his wand, though he'd clearly been defeated. *"This isn't the end,"* he'd panted. *"Blood means nothing. Ancestors are nothing. Someone else will fight you- and win."*

Ginny had whimpered, listening to him. He had spoken like a man about to die.

Voldemort had smiled-horribly. *"Expelliarmus,"* he'd snapped, bringing Harry's wand to him, then flinging it over his shoulder. *"So Priori Incantatem cannot save you..."* He had lifted his own wand and aimed it at Harry's center. *"Your mother cannot save you..."*

Out of the corner of her eye, Ginny had seen it begin to happen. Hermione, who had been holding several younger Death Eaters away from the center of the fight, turned and raced toward Harry. Remus had somehow wrenched himself from within an Imprisonment Curse, Stunned the Death Eaters in his vicinity with a few hard twists of his wand, and followed. From the ground, a badly injured Ron had lifted his wand, pulled himself up, and begun staggering toward Voldemort. Sirius had turned his back-almost fatally-on a duel with Mr. Lestrage, transformed into Padfoot, and bolted toward his godson.

"The Order of the Phoenix and its... refreshing incompetence-" Voldemort had continued derisively, either too focused on Harry to notice the small army that approached, or too sure of his victory to pay them attention *"-are of no use... what a pity... so much in vain..."* His lips had curled in a serpentine smile. *"Farewell, Harry Potter..."*

There had been no doubt in Ginny's mind of what words Voldemort would say next. Feeling as if the world were in slow motion, she had begun to run, joining Ron and Hermione, Sirius and Remus, in throwing herself between Harry and the wand that was about to take his life. She'd felt a push at her back-Harry trying to move them all out of the way and take the fall himself-and she'd pushed back, strangely unafraid to be standing beside her brother, looking up into the flat, raw face of a man who had never known love, or life, or friendship.

And then a feeling unlike any that she had ever known had begun to burn in her heart. It had been like magic-but involuntary. Stronger. It had filled Ginny's every pore, and as it had built she'd felt its warmth not only beneath her skin, but rising up in the air on all sides of her. Love. Sacrifice. Pure nerve. Ron's and Hermione's. Remus's and Sirius's. Harry's. Her own.

Voldemort had leered down at them from his abnormal height and his lipless mouth opened on the Killing Curse. Fearlessly, Ginny had watched him speak the dreaded words, her heart still singing with some power far greater than herself.

But though the Dark Lord had mouthed the curse, he'd made no sound. His slitted eyes had widened slightly, and one long, white hand had fluttered to his throat. He'd glared coldly over their heads at Harry, and opened his mouth again-but this time he had not even been able to shape words.

As they had looked on, united in horror, the skin around Voldemort's lips had begun to shrivel and burn, receding over his teeth as if his very flesh were disintegrating. He had twisted his snakelike head from side to side, clearly in agony though unable to scream, as the blackened muscles beneath his flesh had been revealed.... then a glimpse of bone...

Revolted, sickened, triumphant, they had observed the fall of the Dark Lord as he had decayed at their feet. Ginny remembered perfectly the way he had withered before them, powerless against Expecto Sacrificum, which Harry had invoked and which they had fulfilled by defending him. Voldemort had crumbled in the wake of their love, recoiling into himself, nose collapsing, ears sinking into his head, hands and fingers shriveling into the sockets of his wrists.

His wand had fallen to the earth.

Still screaming soundlessly, Voldemort's shape had begun to shift-a flicker of the demonic man, red-eyed, power-hungry-suddenly a massive serpent, writhing, twisting in air before them, its forked tongue lashing out in futile suffering....

And then, standing alone in Voldemort's place, there had been a boy of sixteen. Pale. Dark-haired. Afraid. He might have been Harry's brother.

"Tom..." Ginny had whispered, trembling.

But with a sharp *crack!* of light and imploding sound, the illusion had vanished, leaving them all in darkness for a fleeting second that felt like an eternity.

And when the world had become light again, on the grass at their feet, scorched black and smoking, there had been nothing left of Voldemort but his wand.

Ginny stared at the ground now, not sure how it was possible that she remembered precisely where the wand had fallen. But she did remember, though the grass had grown back from having been burned and trampled. It had been there. *Right* there. She shivered violently, struck by what evil she had lived through.

She lifted her eyes to the empty castle, trying not to let her gaze linger too long on the ruined ceiling of the Great Hall, or the crumbling stone around the entrance door. She searched out Gryffindor tower, found her old dormitory window, and was possessed by a powerful urge to go inside. Quickly, she ran to the doors, which admitted her without question—they must have recognized her touch and Ginny was glad of it. She climbed the familiar stairs and raced down the corridor that led her to the portrait of the Fat Lady, where she came to a halt.

The Fat Lady's mouth dropped open at the sight of Ginny, but though her eyes lit up, her face grew wistful. She shook her head.

Ginny's heart sank. She had known the passwords to Gryffindor for so many years that it hadn't even occurred to her that there would come a time when she would be barred from entering.

"Prismapillar?" she asked hopefully. That had been the final password of her sixth year.

The Fat Lady sighed. "I'm afraid not, Miss Weasley."

"Oh please," Ginny begged. "You *know* me, you can change the password for me—*please*."

"It's quite against my rules," the Fat Lady protested gently. "You're no longer a resident of Gryffindor."

"But I *should* be," Ginny cried in frustration. "And I miss it. I need to see it."

The Fat Lady pursed her lips and appeared to be weighing Ginny's request, when her painted eyes focused down the corridor and her round, pink face widened in a smile. "So many old students at once," she sighed.

Ginny spun, and caught her breath. Harry was there, standing unobtrusively in the shadows at the far end of the corridor. Ginny was so struck by the look on his face, as he watched her, that she hardly heard the Fat Lady's next words.

"I suppose I can trust the two of you, as there's no one inside that's at risk. Be quick about it. The password is *Fiat Lux*."

"*Fiat Lux*," Harry repeated back, his voice low. Ginny heard the portrait swing open behind her. Harry pointed to it. "Go on," he said quietly.

Ginny made herself turn and climb through the hole. She heard Harry's footsteps and breathing just behind her, and then the portrait swung shut again, leaving them in a silence so thick that Ginny could barely think. Her mind mercilessly echoed her idiotic words back to her. *I would have promised to outlive you...* Her face burning, she went to the picture window across the common room and drew a deep, steadying breath.

To her surprise, the breath helped. Perhaps it was because the common room smelled so comfortingly familiar; the room itself was as clean as elfish magic could make it, but in the air hung every element of Gryffindor student life. It was a rich, wonderful, dusty smell—old books and chess sets and late night fires, muddy broomtails and victory parties, the tang of bursting Christmas crackers, the sour of spilled potions, and the old wetness of uniform cloaks, all heavy with the damp of holiday snowball fights. The smell was so full of memories that it was nearly unbearable; it overwhelmed Ginny and threatened to make her cry. But there was a *feeling* in this air that kept her steady—a bracing quality that seemed to reverberate from the flagstones and weave itself into the tapestries—a lingering energy that Ginny knew deep in her bones. The common room rang with a thousand years of courage.

Ginny put her fingers on the stone windowsill and let her eyes travel the lake and forest, resting her swimming gaze on Hagrid's old hut.

She heard footsteps on the carpets. They could only be Harry's, and they were coming dangerously close. Ginny stayed perfectly still and let him approach her, though why he had followed and what he wanted, she didn't dare imagine.

He took a breath—she heard it. He was so close to her back that he was nearly touching her; she could feel him at her shoulder, looking over it and out the window to survey the grounds with her.

"I can't stand being here."

She barely caught the low words, but she understood them perfectly. It was hard to stand in this room that had become her home, and to know that it was done with her. "I know," she said quietly. "Today's supposed to be... but I'm glad Remus is going to teach me."

Harry took a short breath that sounded suspiciously uncontrolled, and Ginny was shocked to

feel herself seized from behind. Harry's arms were around her, pulling her as close as he could get her, and his face was buried in the slope between her shoulder and her neck. She shut her eyes and let her mouth fall open, feeling heat rise from the deepest part of her, tunneling up through her body to burn in her head. Against the side of her throat, she could feel the brush of Harry's mouth and the line of his nose—the cool lenses of his glasses.

"I can't—" he managed brokenly, into her skin. He was holding her so tight around the middle that she found it hard to breathe, and her heart opened painfully at his tone of voice. He couldn't get the words out but it didn't matter. She knew.

She covered his hands with one of her own, and reached up with her other hand to stroke the short hair at the warm nape of his neck. He was such a puzzle to others, but so simple to her—she didn't know how she knew where to touch him and what to say, but she heard herself mumble words of comfort and before long, Harry had buckled against her back. Ginny found herself—she was too dizzy to know quite how—sitting against him in the enormous Gryffindor window seat. She leaned back on his chest, happy that he kept her trapped in his arms; her head fell back against his right shoulder and he laid his face on her left one.

They were silent and still for a long time, and Ginny watched as the sun crept slowly toward the horizon. It had sunk halfway out of sight before either of them moved or spoke.

"Hermione's leaving," Harry finally croaked.

Ginny nodded. She couldn't imagine what it would be like for Harry, not having one of his family near him. He'd always had trouble letting Ron and Hermione out of his sight. She stayed quiet and waited for him to continue, not wanting to stop him now that he was finally talking about real things.

"And what if Ron..." Harry shook his head against her shoulder. "I'll kill Malfoy for this."

Ginny knew he meant it, and though the words gave her a chill, she was glad to know that Harry was so devoted to her brother. "Nothing's happened so far," she murmured, turning slightly in his arms to fit better against him. "No need to go killing neighbors yet."

Harry gave a jerk that Ginny supposed was a silent, unwilling laugh. "It's just Ron and Hermione—" Harry stopped, as if unable to find words. "Every time I—the two of them always—you know how..."

"They've been your life?"

Harry's arms tightened around her, and Ginny knew she'd made a direct hit. She rubbed her head on his shoulder. It was a privilege, being the person to whom he could speak about his life. She knew he had a hard time saying all the words to Ron and Hermione. She didn't know exactly why he was saying them to her, but she was glad.

"Well, Ron has Sirius," she said slowly, "and Hermione will come back. You know she won't last long, without the two of you."

He shrugged. "Yeah."

"And... you won't have to read anything for awhile, if you don't want!"

This time, Harry did laugh. "Yeah." He loosened his grip on her just enough to find her forearms with his hands. Ginny kept her face turned to the window, her temperature shifting at alarming rates as Harry's fingertips softly and repeatedly opened and shut, just grazing her bare skin. She knew he must be able to feel her hair standing on end, but she didn't mind. She could feel his heart, hammering against her back. Ginny had an idea that if she just turned her face to his... But she shut her eyes instead, and enjoyed being there with him in the quiet. It was strangely comfortable and right.

It was dark on the grounds, and nearly pitch-black in the common room, before his body shifted.

"We... should go back." Harry's voice was reluctant.

Ginny gave a soft little sigh. Surely he was right—their friends would have missed them by now. But she had no desire at all to leave the warm, protective circle of his arms—she'd waited too long to be inside it. As she hesitated to agree with him, she felt a wisp of something touch the back of her neck, and she shivered all the way into her bones. Had he... kissed her there? She still found it nearly impossible that—but there it was again. Ginny felt his mouth, just barely, alight on the hidden skin beneath the line of her hair, and she jumped involuntarily.

"We should really go... they'll be worried..." He was saying it almost as if he wanted her to protest.

Ginny wasn't sure why she didn't. "They *will* be worried," she agreed quietly, and using all her inner strength, she sat up straight. Harry's arms fell away from her and she felt an awful wrench of loss—to combat it, she lifted her hands to fix up her hair, and realized it was practically destroyed. Somehow, though, she didn't mind the idea of her hair staying tousled from having been pressed

against Harry, and she dropped her hands, smiling shyly over her shoulder. "I think I'm a bit mussed up."

Harry looked confusedly at her hair. "Where? It looks good," he said, and though it was dark, Ginny thought he might have blushed. He definitely ducked his head and went about adjusting his glasses in a most unnecessary manner. Ginny watched him, feeling a thrill of importance. She gathered her courage to reach for his hand, thinking that it would be rather nice to walk back to the Three Broomsticks, holding it, when there was a violent *crack!* in the center of the common room that made both of them shoot to their feet and grab their wands.

"Who's there?" Harry demanded, edging ahead of Ginny toward a small, dark shape with rather large ears.

The creature lifted up a short wand with its knobbly fingers. *Snap!* A ball of light materialized at the end of the wand and rose to hover in the air above them, lighting the common room and all their faces. Ginny and Harry squinted for a moment in the bright light, and Harry was the first to speak.

"Dobby!" he gasped.

"Is this..." Dobby breathed, tucking his wand away and hopping up and down on overexcited feet, "... is you—Oh, Harry Potter, sir! I am thinking I will never see you again since you is done with Hogwarts! A great day! A happy day!"

"It's night," Harry remarked, but he grinned when Dobby barreled across the room and flung his arms around Harry's legs.

"You is getting tall, Harry Potter." Dobby looked up at him, and then at Ginny, hope brimming in his enormous eyes. "The Headmistress is telling us that this year the students isn't coming back to Hogwarts..." He rocked back and forth expectantly. "But maybe she is mistaken?"

"No, Dobby," Ginny said gently. "We're just visiting."

"Oh." Dobby's squashed face fell, then brightened again immediately. "But you is here to see Dobby!"

Harry opened his mouth, but Ginny cut in before he could deny that statement. "Yes, we are," she said quickly. "How are you, and Winky, and everyone?"

Dobby shook his head. "Winky is doing well, Miss. She is laying off the butterbeer unless I am making her angry."

Harry snorted, and Ginny hid a grin.

"But the other elves is having troubles," Dobby went on, twisting his fingers.

Ginny frowned. "Troubles?" she repeated. "But I thought you'd won your rights?"

"Oh, yes, Miss!" Dobby drew his strange little wand and raised it lovingly before his eyes. "The Great Leader of the Liberation Front is winning us our wages and our sick days and our wands. A generous witch. A beautiful witch."

Harry made a strangled noise—he found Ginny's hand and gripped it hard, and Ginny gripped back to keep herself from laughing. It was hilarious, the way that the elves now idolized Hermione.

"We is learning our magic again, Harry Potter." Dobby smiled proudly. "One day, I am becoming a great wizard like you and your Miss." He looked at their joined hands, and Ginny's face grew very hot.

Harry made another strangled sort of noise, though this one was very different in nature. "You said you were having troubles, though, Dobby," he managed after a moment. "Troubles like what?"

"Oh... Dobby wishes not to be bothering the great Harry Potter with—"

"Cut it out."

Dobby sighed. "There is too many of us for Hogwarts now, sir. The bad wizards is all in prison and their house-elves is coming here, for work. The headmistress is noble, she lets them all come in, but there is too many now, and when students come back, there is half of us who is having to find new jobs." Dobby shook his head sadly. "Rights is good, Harry Potter, but many families is not wanting to pay us what we earn, and where is half of us going to go?" He looked up at Harry, waiting for the answer.

Ginny and Harry looked at each other helplessly. Neither of them knew what to say.

"There must be somewhere else that needs a large amount of service," Ginny began, but she couldn't think of anywhere off the top of her head that didn't already employ all the liberated elves that it could handle. The Ministry had as many as it could afford, as did the wizarding library system, the Owl Post service, and the Children's Home. The Gringotts goblins didn't trust the elves, now that they were permitted to carry wands.

Harry also seemed at a loss. "We'll... we'll think about it for you Dobby, all right?" he said sincerely.

Dobby nodded, shining with pleasure. "Dobby has no doubt that Harry Potter will think of something."

Harry sighed, almost inaudibly. Ginny squeezed his hand. "Listen, Dobby," she said, "we've got to go now, but it was lovely, seeing you again. Oh—and Hermione says hello to you and Winky."

It was a lie, but it certainly didn't matter. Dobby looked positively ecstatic.

"Oooh, I am telling everyone!" He threw himself at Ginny, this time, and hugged her tight. "Farewell, Miss! Farewell, Harry Potter!"

Dobby's farewells followed the two of them into the corridor, and after bidding their own farewell to the Fat Lady, they laughed themselves all the way out onto the grounds.

"Don't," said Harry, trying to be serious, "and I mean do *not* tell Hermione that the elves are having troubles. She'll never go and be a Thinker if she can stay and campaign for them again."

"Do you think I *want* to wear another embarrassing button?" Ginny retorted, and the two of them burst out laughing again as they crossed the dark, slick lawns. Ginny was having such fun that she had even forgotten about her earlier memories of war and loss, until they ran across the same cold, invisible barrier she'd come up against before. She let out a cry, and threw up her hands against it.

Harry looked around them, on guard at once. "What?" he asked immediately. "What is it?"

Ginny decided not to tell him that she could somehow feel the place where Voldemort had fallen. "Nothing," she said quickly. "I slipped." She forced herself to walk past it, which was much easier to do when Harry found her hand again and held it firmly in his own.

To Ginny, it seemed the shortest walk into town that she had ever taken. She remembered being in school, wishing against all hope that one day she would be walking alongside Harry on a Hogsmeade weekend. It was satisfying on so many levels, to walk with him down the dark main street beneath a sky full of stars, with his fingers curled around hers. They didn't talk much. They didn't have to. The door of the Three Broomsticks was reached far too quickly.

Harry turned to her before reaching for the doorknob, and Ginny wondered if this was the sort of moment... she thought it was. His eyes were gentle and serious and green. Truly green. Not murky, not hazel, not a little bit blue—Ginny forgot what she was doing and where she was, and studied the color—clear and cool and inches away. She'd never seen another person with eyes so vivid; they didn't look quite real, especially surrounded by eyelashes so black that—

He was looking at her mouth. She felt herself go pale.

"Ginny..." He swallowed hard. "Can I..."

The door to the Three Broomsticks swung open, letting a wave of noise and laughter into the dark, quiet street.

"Oh—I'm sorry—" the too-familiar voice cracked with embarrassment, and a pair of brown eyes stared widely at the pair of them.

Ginny had never wanted to hurt one of her brothers. Not really. She'd slapped them, pulled their hair, tickled them, tripped them, hid their things and told on them, of course. But it was all she could do not to pull her wand and curse George Weasley right back into the pub. She glared at him.

George didn't take the hint. Instead, he stepped fully outside, letting the door slam shut behind him. He leaned up against the wall of the Three Broomsticks, and lit a sqworm with his wand.

"Mum's going to kill you if she sees you smoking that," Ginny said angrily.

"Huh?" said George absently, and then looked at the curved, orange-glowing tube clasped between his fingers. He exhaled a spicy smelling smoke and then said, "You're probably right. I guess I'll go for a walk." And with that, he kicked away from the building and strolled away from them.

Ginny turned to address Harry again, but he was already reaching for the handle. He held the door open for Ginny, who tried to catch his eye as she went in—it was difficult, since he was staring at his shoes, but she didn't take it too personally. She wasn't perfectly comfortable being caught by her brother, either.

"Oh, hey, Ginny—" Neville tapped her shoulder and grinned at her. "I'm off. See you around."

"Bye," she said breathlessly, giving him a quick hug and turning back to find Harry—but before she could, her hand was grabbed by someone else.

"Where've you been?" Colin pulled her into an embrace. "We're leaving, and I hardly got to talk to you."

Behind him, Eloise was watching Ginny carefully. Ginny tried to smile at her. "Sorry," she said sincerely. "I'll come up to Diagon Alley and say hi, whenever I come to see my dad."

"And if you could get us an interview with *him*..." Colin winked, and Ginny gave an inattentive laugh. By the time she was finished with her goodbye to Eloise, Harry was halfway across the room, frowning absently at Hermione, who was talking at an alarming rate—about Malfoy, no doubt.

They both headed towards the bar to Ron, who was still behind the counter, and soon enough, Ron began to gesture explosively while Hermione spoke. Ginny watched the three of them together, not sure what it was about their expressions that made her unable to cross the room and join the conversation. But sometimes—and she could always tell when—that trio was uninterrupted.

Slowly, she wandered back to the table where she'd eaten dinner, migrating naturally toward someone who, though she made Ginny wild with annoyance, also had the natural power to give her strength.

"Ginny, dear! Let me order you a pumpkin juice."

Ginny sank into a chair, realizing suddenly how tired she was, and how achy.

Her mother reached out and put a hand on her knee. "Or is it butterbeer now?" she asked, sighing. "I'm sure I'm underestimating your age again." She smiled, and patted Ginny's knee lovingly. "These are lovely dress robes. And to think I never thought of blue for you."

Ginny didn't answer. She scooted her chair closer to her mother's, and lay her head down on her shoulder. It was a gesture she hadn't voluntarily made since childhood.

"Tired?" Molly asked quietly, smoothing the hair back from Ginny's forehead. "Your hair's quite a mess, dear, you must've had nice time dancing."

Ginny nodded, wondering what her mother would think if she *really* knew.

"What a lovely wedding." Molly sighed again. "That horrible son of mine, not even letting me give him one. Not... that big weddings are necessary." She went very quiet, before beginning again briskly. "Did I tell you I've spotted a very nice girl here tonight who I think might be good for George? You and I ought to see what we can do about that." She kissed the top of Ginny's head and put her arm around her.

Ginny nestled a bit closer and, though she hadn't publicly done so in ages, she took her mother's hand. "Which girl is it then?" she mumbled, opening her eyes to watch the dancing couples.

"Right there, with the—oh, with the baby. Well, that won't do. Still, let's find your brother." Before Ginny could tell her mother that George was outside, she had managed to get his twin's attention. "Fred?" Molly asked sharply, stopping him in his tracks as he danced by with Angelina.

"Yeah, Mum?" he asked, looking startled.

"Where is George?"

"George?" Fred repeated, his voice cracking.

"Yes, George," Molly replied, exasperated. "I think you know him."

Fred was crimson. He opened his mouth, shut it, and looked to Angelina, whose lips twisted in a mischievous grin.

"I think George is busy, Molly," she answered merrily, glancing at Fred again. "You know," she whispered, "Ron's been tending that bar for an *awfully* long time." The two of them burst out laughing, and Fred danced Angelina quickly out of earshot.

"Well, we'll get him later," Molly muttered, squeezing Ginny's shoulders. She hummed along with the music for a moment, and then made a sound of approval. "Harry's got so handsome," she murmured, in exactly the same voice she used to muse about all of her own children. She laughed softly. "And he's looking at you, dear."

Ginny's gaze fluttered to Harry at once, and her heart jumped. He *was* looking at her, and with the same sort of expression he'd had on earlier, just outside the door of the pub.

She found she was sitting up straight, no longer needing her mother for support. It was enough to look wordlessly at Harry, from across the room. Her mother's arm fell away. Harry did not break eye contact.

"I'll find George on my own," Molly said quietly. She patted Ginny's knee again, then stood up and walked away.

As soon as her mother's eyes were off them, Ginny let herself smile. Harry smiled back—with just his eyes and the corners of his mouth. He jerked his head in the direction of Ron, who had just been relieved by Madam Rosmerta at the bar and was lifting the counter to get back to the other side, and shrugged apologetically. Ginny shrugged back, then lifted her hands and tilted her head onto them as if they were a pillow, gesturing that she was tired, and wanted to go home. Harry raised his eyebrows at the door, silently asking if she wanted him to leave with her. She smiled, and shook her head, pointing discretely to Ron and Hermione, who were turning their attention back to him again. He sighed a little, and waved without lifting his hand very high. She mouthed 'goodnight'. His eyes lingered on her for a moment before he turned away.

Ginny sat unmoving, thrilled to discover that she had a language with Harry that could be used across a room, and amazed that he'd make a silent offer to leave with her, if she wanted him to, when he was talking to Ron and Hermione. She didn't want him to have to leave them. But he had

offered.

Feeling warm and content, Ginny said her goodbyes to her mother and the bride. Without a word to anyone else, she slipped out of the Three Broomsticks, went to the twins' joke shop, and used their fireplace to go home.

A/N: Thanks to Honeychurch, who wrote the whole Trelawney toast as a birthday gift to Zsenya. You are so very talented, and so muchly loved. Prismapillars are the invention of Jedi Boadicea.

Giggle Grenades would not exist without the brilliant imagination of Cap'n Kathy.

Behind the Three Broomsticks

Rose stood to the side of the dance floor and watched Lavender, her heart a minefield of emotions. Irritation was one: the damn bridesmaids dresses were not only pink, but *tight*; Rose hiked hers up beneath her arms as surreptitiously as possible while still holding a champagne glass, peeking down and blushing for the twelve hundredth time that day at the sight of her own cleavage. Envy was another: Lavender was more than ten years her junior, yet there she was, her mousy head nestled happily on Seamus's shoulder, her white gown evidence that she'd crossed one of womanhood's thresholds well before her sister.

Love was the foremost emotion, however, and Rose was glad of that. It wasn't irritation or envy that won over when Lavender caught her eye from the dance floor and sent her a brilliant smile. It was love. Rose smiled back, just as brilliantly, and felt another flood of tears rush up behind her eyes. The crying thing was getting just a little bit ridiculous.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Mrs. Brown sniffled beside her eldest daughter. "Tissue?"

Rose took one. "Thanks, Mum," she mumbled. "Yes, she's very beautiful. I can't believe..." But she didn't bother finishing, because the truth was, she could believe it. It was as natural as breathing, for Lavender-love. She'd always been that way. A little giggly, perhaps, and far too rash to be considered sane, but always openhearted, even at her silliest. She'd been falling in love with things since her childhood, and they'd always fallen in love right back. Rose still maintained that Binky had died of a broken heart, with Lavender off at school.

"Your time will come," Mrs. Brown said quietly, giving Rose's shoulder a pat.

"Mum, don't."

"You're my first baby, darling," Mrs. Brown persisted gently. "My angel girl." She touched Rose's blonde coiffure and smiled. "I'm so proud of you. I'd be in perfect fits if this were your wedding—I'm sure you'll kill me for saying so, but I'm rather glad it's taken this long. I get more of you this way, even if you've left home and taken to sleeping at work. I'd never see you if you devoted yourself to some man or other."

Rose smiled with tight lips. "Don't worry. You're in no danger of losing me to marriage."

"But one day..." Mrs. Brown said, sighing, and sounding very much like Lavender. It was obvious where the youngest Brown girl had got her romantic tendencies. "And it won't be to anyone like that John, who didn't deserve—"

"Mum. I said *don't*." Rose walked away without waiting for a reply. She hated to hurt her mother, but it was just slow, quiet torture, that kind of talk. There was no point in bringing up old mistakes, and as for the future—well, her mother always sounded so *sure*. It made Rose hope. And hope, Rose knew, was a deadly thing—stretched too thin, it became desperation.

Well, there was always work.

And champagne.

Rose headed for the bar to get a refill, hiking up her dress once more and trying not to notice all the dancing couples around her. She wondered if anyone would ask her to dance, and felt a jolt of panic at the thought that one of the groomsmen might do so, out of pity. All those... little boys. Seamus's friends were terribly young. Even Harry Potter looked like a child, when it came right down to it, savior of the world or not. Rose maneuvered herself behind a few of the taller guests, and pressed towards the bar. Perhaps if she kept out of sight, she wouldn't have to worry about it.

"Well, it's been lovely, girls," said a cheerful male voice, in front of her, "but I've got a bit of a pressing matter to attend to. Be back to torment you in a bit." It was a lovely, lilting, Irish voice, and its owner turned away from the bar just as Rose sidled up to it—he had a drink in either hand and very nearly smacked right into her. She stepped back automatically and looked up into a grinning—and far too familiar—face. She froze in shock.

"Well if it isn't my other Miss Rosie." Mick O'Malley bowed, and held a glass of champagne out to Rose.

She didn't take it; instead, she gaped. "Mick—Mr. O'Malley—what are you *doing* here?" she demanded, feeling very odd. First of all, she wasn't entirely unhappy to see Mick—Well, *of course, he's a colleague*, she told herself. *Perhaps I can actually get something accomplished for the Ministry, instead of wallowing around up here at the bar.* Secondly, something strange was happening to her head. It was filling with a very weird buzzing that made her feel muddled and uncertain. *I've got drunk off one glass of champagne*, Rose thought. *Brilliant.*

"Seamus Finnigan's my cousin, Miss Secretary Privy Rose K. Brown," Mick said, pronouncing each syllable of her name and title as if it were something to eat, rather than to respect. Rose frowned at him. "I was at the wedding, if you didn't notice."

"Well Lavender's my sister! I was *in* the wedding, if you didn't notice," Rose retorted. Mick was Finnigan's cousin? Well that made plenty of sense—a whole family of pyromaniacs.

"Oh, I noticed all right." Mick raised an eyebrow at her. "Those dress robes are a sight better than the Ministry issue," he said, and Rose saw his eyes flicker almost imperceptibly to the totally indecent neckline of her gown. She blushed, then bristled when she heard someone snicker softly—out of the corner of her eye, Rose recognized the Minister's daughter. *Oh, perfect. Just bloody perfect. Try to advance your career, but it all comes to nothing because your sister has a tart's taste in robes.*

"Excuse me," Rose muttered, ignoring Arthur's daughter and pushing past Mick. If ever she had needed a drink, it was now. She clapped her empty glass on the bar and looked for Madam Rosmerta.

"Now what's with all that self-sufficiency, when I've got you a drink right here?" Mick demanded, downing his whiskey with one hand and thrusting the champagne flute at Rose with the other. "Bit rude of you to ignore me altogether. Thought you were the well-bred sort. We called you the Slytherin Sweetheart, once upon a time."

The Slytherin Sweetheart. Rose turned back to Mick at the sound of the old Gryffindor taunt—only it hadn't been a taunt, had it? They'd really meant it. Mick was looking at her as if he meant it still, but Rose turned her head—she wasn't going to be taken for *that* ride. Mick O'Malley had always been a monstrous flirt—even before he had physically developed, he'd had a crazy arrogance about him. Nothing but fresh with any girl who'd stand still enough to listen.

Rose realized that *she* was standing still, and snapped herself to attention. Putting on a show of ennui, she sighed and took the offered champagne. "Fine," she replied in a bored voice, not looking him in the eyes. "Happy?"

"Not by a long shot." His voice was low and quick and Rose was angry with herself for finding it damned sexy. "I've got a couple of top secret Ministry matters to take up with you. Serious questions. I mean it."

He really sounded like he meant it, and Rose looked at him in surprise. Mick had never been one to bring up work if there was pleasure to be had. Perhaps there really *was* a matter of some importance. "Do you?" She lowered her voice and glanced at Arthur's daughter, who was still watching them. Nosy. Probably got it from Bill. "Well we can hardly talk here—is it urgent?"

"You'd better believe it," Mick said meaningfully.

"Well..." Rose frowned down at her unprepared state. Dress robes and bubbly—not exactly ready for action. "I don't have my briefcase and notes, but if you need a word in private, I suppose..."

"You won't need notes for this," Mick said, and his sudden change of tone sent a bolt of anticipation straight through Rose's center. He didn't want to talk business. Not at all. He was putting on a very good show, however, and gesturing to the back door of the pub. "And yeah, it'd better be in private," he added, as his eyes caught hers.

Men. Ludicrous. Did he think he was being subtle? His gaze was too deliberate—light hazel—and it flickered again to the bits of her that were accentuated by her robes. Disgusting. Absolutely inappropriate.

Rose led the way to the back alley.

She wasn't quite sure what she was going to do when she got there, but she was going anyway—walking very quickly, with clipped, Ministry steps, her shoulders back and her chin up. She pushed through the door and shivered—September had descended with a chill, and she was vulnerable to it, in this stupid dress. Mick followed her out, and the door banged shut behind them, the sound of it echoing in the slim alleyway. There wasn't much space between the back of the pub and the stone wall that marked the edge of Hogsmeade proper; it was all over ivy and Rose found herself studying the twists in every vine.

"Congratulations to your sister."

Rose shook herself, and turned. They were out here to talk business; there was no need to distract herself with the scenery. Nothing was going to *happen*. Though, she noticed, there were

no windows that looked from the pub into the alley. That was good. "And to your cousin," she returned, and lifted her glass.

Mick clinked his whiskey to her champagne—how he'd managed to fill his glass again, she didn't know—and they both drank, without looking away from each other. It was like some sort of... silent dare. Her head was buzzing more insistently now.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" she asked. "I assume it's about the dragons?" She hoped she sounded brisk. She didn't feel brisk.

"Nah." Mick still hadn't taken his eyes from hers. "It's got nothing to do with the Ministry."

Rose swallowed. Total bastard. "Then if you'll excuse me, Mr. O'Malley—I was under the impression—" Rose made for the door, expecting Mick to block her.

He stepped aside to let her pass. "You know, I have a first name," he said, sounding just a little irritated. "You said it inside—it's just the one syllable. Bet you could manage it all right if you practiced. Top of our class, and all."

"All right, *Mick*." Rose paused with her hand on the doorknob, and looked over her shoulder at him. His eyes scanned her face, then he quickly studied her bare shoulders and back before glancing away. She felt a rush of heat, under the kind of look he was giving her. It had been a long time since anyone had looked at her like that. Anyone she *wanted* looking at her, anyway. Rose winced at her own inward admission. "What are you looking at?" she asked defensively, trying to pull up her dress and balance her champagne flute, and still be unnoticeable. "I hope you don't think I *chose* these robes," she added, then wished she'd bit her tongue. He was looking at her again, appreciatively and unabashedly.

"I don't really care whose idea they were," he said, and laughed.

Rose glared at him.

"Look, that's a *compliment*," Mick said, exasperated, leaning back against the ivy-covered stones and folding his arms across his chest. He had a broad chest. And nice, thick hair—even if it was a little singed, at the back. "All right, let's have it out right now. What do you hate me for?" he demanded.

Rose was taken aback. "I—don't hate you!" she said, flustered, turning away from the door and toward him, to defend herself. "But it's inappropriate to look a person up and down like that."

"Why, if I like the person and want them to know it?"

"What if she feels differently and finds it unsettling?"

"Do you?" Mick shot back.

Rose evaded. "We *work* together, Mr.—Mick. Casual contact isn't exactly... and if you've brought me out here to... that is, strictly in terms of professionalism..." Rose floundered, trying to find a way out of what she'd already begun to say.

"That's crap and you know it," Mick said.

"It's not!"

"Oh? You're saying I might've brought you out here to seduce you, which would be against your professional ethics?"

Rose flushed. "I—well... Yes!"

Mick nodded. "Fine. Say I was doing just that. You're the Secretary Privy. I work for Charlie. For the time being, our dragons are under the Ministry's umbrella, but it's only for the time being—we're a temporary department at best, employed by the Ministry, but hardly officials. Hardly Councilmen. You and I have nothing to do with each other, professionally." Mick finished his shot, and set the glass on the ground. "Not that it matters—this isn't about work. You're hacked off at me on Slytherin principle. You won't like a Gryffindor." He tossed his head.

Rose's jaw dropped. It was difficult to find the flaw in his logic about work—but he was dead wrong about this being some sort of House-feud. "That's a lie."

"You act like we're all a bunch of children."

"Some of you *are*. Dragons—Billywigs—"

Mick started; he uncrossed his arms and his eyes went wide.

"Yes, Mr. O'Malley, I know that you and your *boss* have spent a disproportionate amount of time *stung up*, and if there were others to run your department, I might well have you fired!"

"See? The truth comes out!" Mick said hotly from his spot against the wall.

"But that has nothing to do with Gryffindor. I like plenty of Gryffindors. My *sister* is a Gryffindor. My brother in law? Gryffindor. My boss—"

"You just don't respect guts."

"I don't see the sense in being stung by insects, or in dragon-riding, if that's what you mean."

"That's because you've never ridden a dragon." Mick lowered his chin and looked at her through narrowed eyes. "You'd *love* it. I'll take you up."

"No bloody way in hell," Rose muttered unthinkingly.

Mick chuckled. "*Well*. She doesn't wig and she won't get on a dragon, but she drinks, doesn't she, and she curses like an Auror right enough."

"Just shut up," Rose snapped, and downed the rest of her champagne in order to avoid making eye contact. She cursed all the time, in her head—she was cursing herself, even now. Rarely did she let the words slip out, however; it simply wasn't good behavior, and it was terrible politics. It showed carelessness, baseness, and disrespect, and it certainly wasn't the sort of language one bandied about in the Ministry—or so she'd thought, before working with Arthur Weasley and his sons. And Sirius Black. And the whole Gryffindor lot of them.

"Seems to me," Mick said slowly, after a long pause, "that this conversation's taken a wrong turn somewhere. You must want me to let you alone."

Rose's heart did a funny jump, and she shook her head. "You don't—have to," she said, staring into her glass and wishing she hadn't drunk all its contents. She needed something to occupy herself with. She should have just nodded, when he'd said that, and let him go inside—but though she wouldn't admit, even to herself, what she was waiting for... she was still waiting for it. "I could go in, I suppose," she said, for lack of anything else to say. "I'm out of champagne."

Mick pushed off from the wall and crossed to her in one long stride; he pulled his wand and tapped it against her glass with a muttered spell she'd never heard. The glass was suddenly full again.

"Oh," said Rose, not looking up at him. "Well, that's a convenient one."

"Family secret," Mick said quietly. "No good asking me to teach it to you."

"I wasn't going to. If I knew how to do that, I'd go alcoholic." Rose laughed a little, and so did Mick—and she didn't back up when he took another, smaller step towards her, closing the gap between them. Rose's breath caught. Yes.

"I'd like to try something over again, if you don't mind," he said, brushing the top of her right shoulder with his fingertips.

Rose shuddered, and shut her eyes. This was stupid. So stupid. They hadn't even talked, really. He didn't know her. But his *hand*. "What?" she made herself ask.

"Giving you a compliment. That all right?"

Rose nodded, her throat tight.

"You're lovely, Rose." Mick caressed the side of her throat with one hand, and took away her champagne flute with the other. Rose was grateful for it; she wasn't sure how much longer she could have kept her grip.

"In these robes, you mean," she managed. "Well, it's the last time you'll see—"

"Take the compliment." Both his hands were on her shoulders now, caressing down her arms. He had strong hands. Fingers slightly rough from work and wear. "You're lovely," he whispered, leaning in so that his mouth brushed her ear when he spoke.

Rose wanted to protest the words, but Mick seemed to sense it coming.

"Hush," he murmured, when she opened her mouth. "I mean it."

She tilted back her head and felt it come into contact with the wall of the pub. Mick's hands traveled up to her shoulders again, and she didn't stop him when he traced along her collarbone and then downward, becoming more familiar with the neckline of her robes. "Oh, damn," she breathed. Her knees were unsteady. She braced her hands on the wall as Mick's fingers trailed down the front of her and came to circle her waist.

"I can't stop watching you," he muttered in her ear. "It's months now. You know that."

She shook her head, barely able to move. Someone had said words like that to her before... a long time ago... She'd promised herself not to listen again, but the promise was distant, and the memory so old that it was just an echo, far too weak to do battle with the present reality of cold stone on her back and hot hands climbing upwards from her waist and Mick's mouth finally covering hers. She yielded to it. Her better self gave a final protest, sending a warning to her brain that this little tryst was going to haunt her on Monday, at work, where there would be no gown and no champagne and very little self-respect.

But, too far-gone in pleasure to heed her conscience, Rose reached blindly for Mick's waist. She held onto him as he touched her, and pretended that Monday simply did not exist.

— CHAPTER EIGHTEEN —

Morning After, Night Before

Lips softly touched Harry's, and slim hands moved in his hair. He stretched out totally and let her have access to him—he wanted her to have access to everything. Her fingers were on his neck; her mouth met his in a kind of sweet fusion he didn't recognize; she was warm and bright and real, and he wanted to keep her there so badly that he could barely breathe. When she pulled away, he mumbled for her to come back, but she continued to move backwards, swiftly, disappearing into the darkness around them as if she were being pulled. She stretched her hands toward him and he grabbed for hers, but missed—he had no power to reach her. His scar began to burn.

"Harry—" she called, frightened.

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead—" begged another voice, behind him.

Harry turned his head, frantically searching for his mother, but she was nowhere to be seen. Panicked, he turned back to look for Ginny, but she had disappeared entirely—he could hear her sobbing, just beyond the edge of darkness. Weak with fear, he tried to move his feet and found he couldn't.

"Not Harry! Please... have mercy... have mercy..." There was a sickening scream, and Harry pulled at his legs so hard that he finally made them move, but to no purpose. His knees gave way and he stumbled to the ground, striking his head on the floor. Shaking the pain away, he groped for balance, pushing himself to his knees on the carpet, trying to disentangle himself from the sheet that had somehow got wrapped around both his legs and most of his middle. He fell against the side of something solid, realizing even in darkness that his glasses were gone. His surroundings were a blur. He groped around with his fingers and found himself vulnerable.

A loud voice cut into his fear and sent him awkwardly to his feet, where he fumbled uselessly for a wand that wasn't there. Panting, he tried to make sense of the world around him.

"Oi, Potter! Get your lazy arse out of that bed! Oi, Potter! Get your lazy arse out of that bed! Oi, Potter! Get your lazy arse—"

"C'm'n'harry—" Ron groaned sleepily. "Shutitoff."

Harry drew a shaking breath as the world began to make sense. He was awake. It had all been a dream. His legs buckled in relief and he found himself seated on his own bed, in his own room. He reached to the nightstand and blindly shut off the alarm clock that Remus had given him for his birthday, then snatched up his glasses and fixed them on his face to see that Ron had fallen back into a shallow, scowling sleep. He reached up two fingers and touched them to his scar; it was painless now. There could be no danger coming. It had truly been a dream.

It had been months since a dream like that had ruined his sleep, and Harry wondered if he shouldn't have gone to that wedding. Seeing Hogwarts had brought everything back in a terrible rush—there were good memories there, but the most recent ones had the power to drown them out. Hogwarts was still broken. Not to mention that Ron was in serious trouble and Malfoy was the cause of it. Harry flinched at the thought. And now the old terrors were showing up in his dreams, as if Voldemort hadn't been defeated at all, but had only disappeared for another year.

Slowly, Harry managed to pull himself free of the bed sheet that had been restraining him. Silently he dressed in practice robes, put out Hedwig's food, and picked up his Firebolt. In the kitchen he poured himself cereal, but stared at it and couldn't eat a bite. His stomach was tight. Placing his elbows on the table, he propped his face in his hands and moaned.

Ginny's body, in his arms. He could still feel her shift against him—that much hadn't been a dream. His fingers remembered the cool skin of her arms and the way faint bumps had raised up at his touch. Her hair had smelled faintly of pine, of being outdoors, and against his mouth, the nape of her neck had been unexpectedly warm and soft—

He had to go to practice.

Harry pushed back his chair and grabbed his Firebolt, ready to Disapparate, but somehow he found himself on the stairs instead, climbing them two at a time. He hadn't forgotten anything in his own room and he didn't try to pretend he was headed there; following the same gnawing inner directive that had taken him to the Gryffindor common room the night before, he went to the girls' room door, and pushed at it.

It squeaked horribly. Harry yanked back his hand, flattened himself against the wall and drew his wand, casting a quick and effective Silencing Spell on the hinges. Satisfied, he pushed again and opened the door just the necessary inches.

Dawn was breaking outside; the sky beyond the curtains grew dark pink with dim light. It spilled into the room in slivers, one crossing the girls' desks in a thin beam, lighting books and papers and a ridge of Crookshanks's fur. Another passed along the beds. Harry could see Hermione quite clearly; she slept nearest the door, curled on her side, hair obscuring half her face. And beyond her, flat on her back with her covers shoved off, was Ginny.

Ginny slept with one arm thrown above her head; the other was draped across her stomach. Her mouth was open, and light fell directly across it. Harry stared at it for a long moment, and jumped when her lips moved.

"No..." she mumbled suddenly, and Harry wondered if all the Weasleys talked in their sleep, like Ron. He listened close. "No... Tom..."

Tom. Harry shivered, and anger made a fist in his gut. She had nightmares, too. He remembered Ron having said something about that once.

"Please not Harry...not Harry..."

The words were too familiar, and Harry felt a wave of nausea so strong that he had to grip his Firebolt for balance.

"You're not him..." Ginny began to cry, very quietly, in her sleep, and Harry felt a rage of hatred for the thing that had made her—and all of them—this way. He nearly went toward her.

But Hermione's eyes had already snapped open—she rolled toward Ginny and her feet gently hit the floor. Harry moved back into shadow, knowing he shouldn't watch, but unable to take his eyes away as Hermione stumbled to Ginny's bed and sat sleepily on the edge of it. She softly smoothed Ginny's hair and then took Ginny's hand down from above her head and held it in both of her own. "He's not here," she said groggily, stroking the freckled fingers. "That's all over now. Shhh."

To Harry, it seemed that this scene must have played itself out many times. Hermione seemed completely prepared for the nightmare, and Ginny didn't wake, but the mothering seemed to do her good. Her breathing regulated and her mouth fell slack once more. Harry wondered if she had been just as affected as he, by visiting Hogwarts. She'd certainly seemed lost, the way she'd stopped in the middle of the grounds and stood there—he'd watched her from the bottom of the hill. And the way she'd pled to be let into the common room... he understood that.

Hermione replaced Ginny's hand on her covers and got up to go back to bed, but stopped short at a loud, hissing noise from her desk. Harry froze. Crookshanks was glaring right at him, his back arched, and Hermione peered curiously at the crack in the door.

"Who's there?" she whispered. "Ron, is that you?"

Harry Disapparated.

The next sound he heard was a shrill whistle, and the same voice he'd heard from his alarm clock.

"About time, Potter—it's nearly six in the morning." Oliver Wood strode toward him, looking as though six in the morning was a fairly lazy hour to show up on the Quidditch pitch.

Harry pulled gloves from his pockets and tugged the hide over his fingers, then mounted his broom with a muttered, "Sorry," and shot into the air.

"No—get back here." Oliver waved up at him. "No practice today, or have you forgotten? We're here to discuss positions and reserves. I've made my choices."

The Firebolt shot back to the ground, and Harry made a rocky landing, staring at Oliver. He *had* forgotten. The events of the wedding had driven the most important day of his life right out of his mind. Though, he dimly reflected, he was going to have to reevaluate what he'd consider as the most important day of his life. He stood in front of Oliver, but hardly saw his captain at all. There was a smell of grass and mud and practice robes, and Harry's mind traveled back to the Hogwarts grounds, where Ginny stood on the hill, staring at nothing, her pale blue dress robes whipping around her ankles.

"Potter?" Oliver demanded sharply. "Did you want to join us?" He pointed to the huddle of players that stood on the far side of the field, all looking quite nervous and excited.

"Huh?" Harry said, snapping out of it as well as he could. "Oh. Yeah."

"Unless you're not *interested* in the announcements?" Oliver challenged, crossing his arms.

"No, no—I am." Harry quickly followed Oliver toward his fellow players and joined them, glancing briefly at Maureen Knight. She stood to his left, face pale with worry, but her hands were clasped decidedly behind her back and her chin was bravely up, waiting for the outcome. Harry wasn't sure if it was his imagination, or if Oliver looked at her for an extra-long moment before opening his mouth.

"The Chudley Cannons," he announced, "will be making a comeback this year. You know it. I know it. Pretty soon England's going to know it, and won't it be priceless to see the crowd cheering when we walk away with that League Championship?"

There was a general muttering of assent, but the sharp "Yes, Sir!" that Oliver usually inspired seemed to be dampened by nerves. Harry wondered why he wasn't nervous at all. At least, not about Quidditch.

He was going to see Ginny again, when he got home, and he'd have to think of something... to say to her. Because there were still those *things* she'd said, about outliving him—Harry flushed with remembered embarrassment, though he found he didn't mind—and then her eyes, outside the door of the Three Broomsticks...

Damn George.

"Potter!"

Two sharp claps shattered Harry's reverie and his eyes flew open. Oliver was glaring at him.

"Tired, you?" Oliver barked.

"Nervous," Harry lied, his voice cracking.

Oliver raised an eyebrow, but appeared to be fighting a smile. "Ah. Well, let's get right to it, then." He withdrew a scroll of parchment from his pocket, and snapped it open in his hands. "Chasers!" he called. The group of players to Harry's right stepped forward slightly, as a group. Harry could feel their tension as Oliver read the list of names. "First string: Firoza Newland, Paul Wyeth, Cole Kerry—" Harry heard sighs of relief and saw Firoza slam a victorious fist into her palm as Oliver read out the names of first and second reserves. She shared a grin with Cole Kerry, while Paul Wyeth looked to be quite in shock.

"Beaters!" Oliver surveyed the group to Harry's left. "First string: Marty Gudgeon, Medusa Francis—" Marty turned deep purple with pride and looked down at his bat as Oliver listed the rest. Harry watched him and his heart began to pound, realizing that his own name might also be called at any moment. Maybe he *was* nervous.

"The Keeper—that's me," Oliver said cheekily, grinning up at all of them. "First reserve, Darren Wolfe, second reserve, Michaela Pummelfront." The two reserves shook hands, smiling. "And finally, the Seeker."

Oliver cleared his throat in the sudden silence. Next to Harry, Maureen Knight went very still.

"First string: Harry Potter."

Harry's jaw dropped. Numb shock overtook him and a rush of cold butterflies flooded his stomach. He was Seeker. For the Chudley Cannons. It wasn't just a school dream—it had happened—he was playing professional Quidditch. His heart, which had already sped up, began to beat wildly against his ribs as his mind spun in dizzy disbelief. He hardly noticed Knight slump a little beside him, her proud chin coming down just barely.

"First reserve: Maureen Knight," Oliver briskly went on. His eyes darted up toward her, then back down to his parchment. "And there we are. Everyone else..." Oliver let go of the parchment with one hand, letting it curl into his other palm as he looked across the group with a satisfied nod. "Thanks for a good, hard workout, this summer. See you next round. Team, come with me."

The disappointed few who'd been left out of the lineup gathered their things and Disapparated. Harry walked, with his teammates behind him, toward a table that Oliver must have magicked into place. It was covered with scrolls, and his eyes fell on the one that bore his name.

"Season contracts," Oliver explained briefly. "Take these home, look over the terms, and bring them back signed in the morning. Be sure this is what you want for a year."

"Who wouldn't want it?" Marty Gudgeon snorted softly, still red in the face with happiness. He grinned at Harry.

Harry found himself grinning back, though he could hardly believe it was happening—it still hadn't really hit him. Seeker. For the Cannons. Ron was going to lose his mind.

"Congratulations." Knight had gripped his hand and was shaking it firmly. Harry jumped—the last hand in his had been Ginny's and though this was nothing like it, his mind went there immediately. Their fingers had fit together so easily, on the walk back into Hogsmeade; when she'd turned to him outside the pub door, her eyes had fallen half shut. Harry had felt his heart flip over;

it repeated itself now, at the memory.

"Really, Potter, well done."

Harry jumped, trying to remember where he was. This was Quidditch. Ginny wasn't here. Maureen Knight was trying to be polite to him, and he was supposed to congratulate her in return. "You, too," he attempted, knowing it was a stupid thing to say.

"You deserve it," Knight insisted, and her voice was so well controlled that Harry could hardly hear the crushing disappointment in it.

Oliver slapped a scroll into Harry's other hand and grinned at him. "Yes you do, Potter," he agreed, reaching out to clap Harry on the shoulder. "Yes you do. You earned this down to the ground. Best Seeking I've ever seen from you, or anyone else, for that matter. Damned glad you came out for this team."

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Maureen Knight grip her contract with unnecessary ferocity, and heard the parchment crumple.

"Thanks," he mumbled quickly. "I can't believe... so... we're done?"

"Until six sharp, tomorrow. *Real* practice, in the morning." Oliver's eyes narrowed happily. "Here's where the serious training begins. You ready, Potter?"

Harry nodded, incredulous. He could not remember a time when two such good days had come to him; he had no practice expressing the kind of happiness he felt. Oliver continued to beam at him until, being unable to think of anything coherent to say, Harry lifted his contract into the air in silent farewell, and Disapparated.

He Apparated within the safe confines of his bedroom, where no one but Ron would be lurking. Ron was there—still fast asleep on his back, his arms flung wide. He was mumbling to himself, and after Harry caught the word 'Hermione,' he was grateful that he couldn't make out anything else. Quickly he shed his practice robes and placed his Firebolt in the corner. He looked from the Chudley Cannons contract to Ron, and tried to figure out what was the best way to tell his friend that he was going to be playing Seeker for his childhood dream team. He grinned, just thinking about it, and was about to fall back into bed and get a little extra sleep, when an unusually loud rustling of feathers drew his eyes to the corner where the owl perches stood.

Pig flew in circles around Hedwig's head, but she ignored him; her attention was entirely focused on a sleek, dark brown visitor, whose beak was in her bowl.

"Hey," Harry whispered, and Hedwig immediately flew to him, perching possessively on his arm. Harry stroked her wing as he walked to the perch, then quickly detached a letter from the visiting owl's leg, noting as he did so that its other ankle bore a tiny silver ring, inscribed with the letters CC~MoM. The Classified Confidential tag of the Ministry. Hedwig hooted quietly at the stranger as if to say his job was done, and when he had departed she returned to her perch with a huff, unceremoniously displacing Pig.

Harry looked down at the letter in his hands. It looked identical to the one that Charlie Weasley had sent him, a week ago. He glanced at Ron, who had not stirred.

As silently as possible, Harry unrolled the letter and skimmed it.

Dear Harry Potter,

We apologize for addressing you again on the matter of the P.A.P., which has now become a matter of some urgency. In order to contain the Dementors at Azkaban, we will require nine flight-trained professionals to staff our dragons; we have not received as many affirmative responses.

Please reconsider your answer. The Ministry needs you.

Sincerely,

Charles Weasley

Chairman of the Permanent Azkaban Patrol

p.s.—Harry, mate, ignore this. I'm serious. The Secretary Privy's making me send them back to everyone who declined, otherwise I'd never bother you twice. Say hi to Ron and Ginny for me. ~Charlie

Harry wasn't quite sure what possessed him. Perhaps it was that there was nothing he wouldn't do for the Weasley family, and the Ministry seemed lately to be as much Weasley Headquarters as the Burrow itself. Perhaps it was simply that there was no one there to stop him. He sat at his desk, dipped a quill in ink, and scratched out a reply.

To Charlie Weasley and the P.A.P.

I'll be there September 7th. Count me in.

~Harry Potter

Before he'd thought about it further, Harry attached the note to Hedwig, who rubbed her smooth head in the crook of his arm appreciatively, and took off toward the Ministry after her fellow. Harry watched her until she was out of sight, then picked up the unopened Chudley Cannons contract, walked blindly to his bed and lay down, trying to work out what he'd just done, and *why*.

He was an idiot. He was insane. There was no call for him to go to Azkaban—Charlie had told him not to bother. Hermione would be anxious to the point of illness. Ron would be crushed when he knew that Harry had turned down the position of Seeker on his favorite team. Oliver would be disgusted to find that Harry had led him on all summer. Sirius would be enraged, when he discovered that Harry had signed on to face the Dementors on a daily basis.

Ginny would just *look* at him.

He could already see her expression, and he screwed up his eyes against it. He'd seen the look on her face before, in school, whenever she'd been worried about him—but it had never made him feel so sick to his stomach; he turned on his side, clutching the useless contract in his hand, and tried not to think about what he'd just given up. Seeking. Professionally. Flying against another team, ignorant to the real troubles of the world for the first time in seven years, taking just one season to enjoy what made him truly happy—he'd just tossed it away because of a letter from the Ministry that Charlie had all but ordered him not to answer.

Somewhere in the depths of his mind, a voice told him that his father would have done the same thing, and Harry clung to it, hoping it was right. His mother and father had both done everything in their power to fight the Dark forces in the world, and those forces were still at work. The Dementors had killed that woman, in front of her son. They *could* escape. And if somebody needed to get on a dragon and stop them, then...

Ginny would understand. She could hardly be upset with his choice—it was for her father and brother, as much as anything else, that he had chosen to gear up not for Quidditch, but for dragon riding.

Dragon riding.

Harry's stomach knotted in several places. He remembered, all too clearly, what it had felt like to step out of the tent and face the Hungarian Horntail during the Triwizard Tournament. He'd stood at its feet and felt like a morsel of food. He'd *been* a morsel of food, and very lucky to escape. He and Ron—and everyone else—had always considered Charlie to be partially mentally ill for dealing with dragons as closely as he did. This was the sort of thing that Hagrid might be able to handle, Harry thought frantically, but *he* certainly couldn't. He didn't even want to try. Harry rolled over and looked uneasily at Pig, wondering if he shouldn't try to get the tiny owl to overtake Hedwig and bring back his idiotic reply before it reached the Ministry.

Ron sniffed loudly. His bedsprings creaked, and he yawned widely. He'd be fully awake soon; it was light out now.

Harry looked dismally at the contract in his hands, knowing what Ron's first question of the morning would be. Not even the fact that Ron was facing a trial against Malfoy could make him forget that the Cannons' season roster was being announced today, and Harry knew it. He also knew that he couldn't face the inevitable disappointment in Ron's face, when he told him the truth. Maybe... maybe he'd just wait until Hermione was awake, to cushion the blow.

Without a sound, he rolled determinedly out of bed; there was no point in putting off telling Oliver about his decision. Oliver deserved to know as soon as possible—and at least one person would be happy about this. Maureen Knight would get to play Seeker. Feeling only a little less nauseated about the idea of facing his team captain, Harry grabbed Charlie's second letter from his desk, as evidence.

He slipped out of his bedroom and into the corridor before Ron could wake up, then stood in indecision, wishing that there were some way out of relating his decision right to Oliver's face, and wondering where he'd even *find* Oliver now that practice was done for the day. Maybe he should just contact him at home, by fire, Harry reasoned, twisting Charlie's letter in his hands. That way, if Oliver had an attack, he wouldn't really have to be in the room for it. But a sinking feeling in his gut told Harry that not only did he have to tell Oliver in person, but that it was more than likely that his old captain was still out on the pitch, practicing, where he'd be quite easy to find. He'd used to stay and practice long after the Gryffindor team had been dismissed, and Harry couldn't imagine that his habits had got any less obsessive.

Harry steeled himself for what would surely be a wretched conversation, and was about to Disapparate when the door to the girls' room opened.

He wasn't sure why he stayed there, waiting. All his instincts told him to get out of the line of fire. But, just as if he were dreaming again, Harry found that his feet were stuck to the floor.

Ginny appeared in the doorway, still yawning; her hair retained some of yesterday's dress-up

curl, but she must have brushed most of it out—maybe because it had got so tousled in Gryffindor tower, against his shoulder. Harry's face grew warm as he recalled the way she'd reached up to fix it, failed, and smiled winningly at him.

She turned toward the stairs now, caught sight of him, and gave him the same sort of smile. It made Harry's heart pound twice as hard as it had when he'd been made Seeker.

"Good morning," she said shyly, but she didn't look away, and Harry knew that it was *necessary* that he reply.

"Hi." It had taken an Olympian effort. He congratulated himself for it. The greeting was followed by a pressurized silence; Harry felt as if he were underwater.

"So, tell me..." Ginny attempted, almost evenly, but, perhaps because neither of them had broken eye contact yet, her voice broke and trailed away.

Harry felt a flutter of nerves in his gut. She was going to bring up last night. She was going to ask him what he'd meant by it—she'd demand to know why he'd followed her and taken her by surprise and held onto her like that. He braced himself for it.

"Go on, tell me," she began again, more confidently, "what happened?"

Harry blinked, and tried to figure out what she was talking about. He had a feeling he was missing something obvious. "When?" he asked tentatively.

She frowned. "This morning," she answered, looking confused. "Didn't Oliver announce—I thought today was the day, but I must've got it wrong."

Quidditch. She wanted to know what had happened with the Cannons. The knots in Harry's stomach intensified tenfold and he watched her eyes, knowing what he was about to see in them.

"Yeah, Oliver announced everything."

Ginny's eyes lit up, a little, quite as if she couldn't help it. "Oh, all right. And...?"

Harry steadied himself as much as he could. "I made Seeker."

"Oh!—Harry—congratulations!" Ginny's eyes shone and she lost her reserve; she came quickly toward him and had her arms around him in seconds. "I'm so happy for you," she said, and she sounded it.

Harry didn't know how to tell her the rest. "I'm not playing Quidditch," he blurted, wanting to get it out before she could get really disappointed. "Don't get excited." He felt far-removed, as if he was listening to someone else say the words, and stood numbly as Ginny withdrew her arms and took a step away.

She studied him. "But you... made Seeker," she said. "You *just* said—"

"I know." Harry didn't want to say the rest of it out loud; to spare himself, he thrust Charlie's letter out, inviting Ginny to take it. She did so, warily. Her eyes skimmed its contents, and Harry waited for her to show her face again. He braced himself for the expression he'd been dreading.

She lifted her eyes—they were like little Pensieves, Harry thought suddenly. Everything showed right up in them. He didn't even have to guess what she was thinking.

"You didn't say yes," she whispered.

"Yeah. I did." Harry grabbed the letter, his defensiveness getting the better of him.

"Why? We all *told* you not to—"

"Because! *This*—" he shook the parchment "—is a hell of a lot more necessary than playing sports."

"Not for you," Ginny said, her voice shaking. "And you know it." She stepped up to him. "Change your mind," she said simply.

Harry narrowed his eyes at her. She had no right to be upset with him—he was doing the *right* thing, and if she couldn't see it, well then, that wasn't his fault. "I need to tell Oliver," he muttered, stuffing the letter in his pocket and pulling his wand.

"No." Ginny grabbed the other end of the wand before he could twist it. "Harry, if you didn't answer that Ministry letter, then don't you dare." Her eyes were furious now, and steely, and Harry was shocked to recognize her mother in her.

"I already did," he shot back. "Excuse me, please." He tried to pull his wand out of her grip, but she held fast.

"No—write again and tell Charlie you've changed your mind. Harry, you're *Seeker*. He's going to understand that if anybody will."

"Let *go*—"

Ginny looked as though she'd burst with frustration, but she didn't hold on this time, when he yanked his wand away. She didn't drop her hand, either. To Harry's surprise, her fingertips fluttered up and hovered in the air, a few inches from his heart. She shut her eyes and tilted up her face, and Harry felt heat rise in his skin; it shot through his center and into his head. He didn't know what she was doing. But the last time her face had been this close to his... He felt his

breathing grow irregular as he waited for her to touch him.

"Ginny?" he dared softly, when she didn't move again for several long seconds.

Ginny opened her eyes and snatched her hand away. "I'm going too, then," she announced.

It took Harry a moment to realize what she meant, and fear crept into the back of his mind at the look of total stubbornness on her face. She wasn't kidding. "No, you're not," he tried, but her eyes were flinty and her lips pursed.

"Play Quidditch, then."

Harry shook his head. "I can't. I already told Charlie."

"Then tell him this, instead."

"No." Harry felt the old determination rise up on him, and felt suddenly sure that he'd made the right choice. He had a duty.

"Then I *will* come up there," Ginny repeated hotly, looking quite as if she was ready to get on a broom and go, right then.

Harry made an agitated noise. "What for?"

"I'm a good flier. And I'm good with animals."

"And you've gone mental," said a voice down the hall, "if you think Charlie's going to let you near a dragon."

Harry whirled. Ron was looking right at him, pale with sleep except where Malfoy had bruised him, and spotted with freckles, his long arms dangling almost helplessly, his striped pajamas making him look almost like a first year, again. But his expression was not childlike. He looked unusually tired and unexpectedly resigned.

"You really did make Seeker?" he asked quietly. "For the Cannons?"

It was worse than anything Ginny, or anyone, could have said to him. Harry felt his heart crash into his shoes. He nodded.

"And you really... aren't taking it."

Harry opened his mouth to explain, then realized it was useless. "I'm sorry," was all he could say. "I'm sorry, Ron."

Ron was quiet a moment, and then he turned and went back into their room, shutting the door behind him.

Harry stood there, struck dumb, until he heard Ginny snifle. He couldn't turn around and risk seeing her cry; instead, he looked straight down the corridor and fixed his eyes on the wall. "You have to understand," he told her, but the words came out more like a plea than he had intended. "I can't just... it's not my fault if..."

"Then *you* have to understand, too." Ginny's voice was thick, but determined. "If you're going, I'm going."

"But you'll have classes," Harry said weakly, instantly remembering the dozens of times that he, Ron and Hermione had skived off theirs, in order to help each other.

Ginny didn't answer; she was evidently through with the discussion. Harry heard her footsteps disappear down the stairs.

Feeling no great urge to follow her this time, Harry gave his wand a hard twist, and Disapparated to find Oliver.

* * * * *

Hermione sat in her bed, propped up against the pillows, idly running the feather of her quill across her mouth and back again as she decided what to write. She had been unable to say anything for several minutes, choosing instead to watch out the window at the moon and wonder about everything, her heart heavy and turbulent all at once.

It had been a long day. A *long* day. She'd watched Harry return from telling Oliver his decision, and watched Ron's face close off, and her heart had gone out to both of them. She still didn't understand what Harry thought he was doing, and both she and Ron had tried to talk him out of it, but he had only snapped at them that everybody needed to get off his case.

She looked across the room, to where her one small bag was packed and sitting against the opposite wall. Tomorrow morning she'd be getting off Harry's case, deliberately, for the first time since she'd met him—never before had she willingly parted from Harry or Ron. The only thing left to pack for Cortona was her diary, which sat open on her lap.

Deciding what to pack had been one of the most difficult decisions that she'd ever had to make. The Thinker wasn't expecting her. She'd received no formal invitation, but realized that what she chose to bring with her would probably be considered some sort of a test. She'd read as much as she could and after several long walks alone had decided that the best thing to do was to pack as

little as possible. For a girl used to carrying four or five books around with her—just in case—it had been a monumental choice to make.

In the end, she'd packed several roles of parchment, a few quills and several bottles of ink, a spare set of robes and a few select toiletries. No books. She'd decided that in order to think, she would need to free herself completely. Books were her crutch in life and she had to learn to get around them. Of course, she hadn't realized she'd packed *Hogwarts, A History* into her bag, and had only become aware of what she'd done after going through the bag for a third time, trying to figure out why it was so heavy.

Ron was still downstairs. Hermione glanced nervously toward the door and then towards Ginny's empty bed. Ron was still downstairs, but he hadn't said goodbye to her yet, and she knew he wouldn't waste his last night with her. He'd be up here soon, and they'd have the room to themselves. The thought gave her a funny little chill of anticipation and fear—Ron, on the few opportunities she'd had to curl up and sleep beside him, had been solid and warm at her back. Kissing him was such a lovely wrench all over, every time. He was so protective, so infuriating, so safely hers.

So hard to refuse.

Finally moved to write something, she licked the nib of her quill to start the ink flowing and wrote:

HGoW

Gwen?

Hmm?

I'm just sitting here, thinking.

About what?

Everything. I'm nervous.

Well, that's perfectly natural; you're getting ready to try something you don't completely understand. It's an adventure. Anyone would be nervous.

I'm nervous about something else.

Has something else happened with Ron? Have the Malfoys pressed formal charges?

No, they've just told the *Daily Prophet* that they will. Nothing solid yet.

Perhaps they won't follow through on it—there were witnesses, after all.

Draco Malfoy, even with a cracked head, will still find a way to bother Ron and Harry for as long as he lives. Especially Ron. I can't imagine that he won't attempt to get him in trouble, now that he's got the chance. I can't go to Cortona.

Why not?

I can't leave Ron.

Hermione... we've been through this before.

I know, I KNOW. I know. And it's all true. If I don't go, and I never find out what this is, then I'll think about it forever and I'll hold it against him in the end. I don't want to resent Ron. But I don't want to be away from him, either—and not just for his sake, Gwen... I don't know how to *do* without him, anymore. He's been the other part of me for such a long time, I don't think I'll know quite who I am, on my own.

I know.

Oh, I'm such an idiot. I'm crying.

You're allowed.

No, I'm really not. He'll be up here any second.

Up here? As in 'up in your room'?

Yes.

But where's Ginny?

Well... I had a long talk with Ginny today, after Harry told everybody about Quidditch and all, and she asked me if I was excited to be leaving and I just started to cry. I've got a hair trigger today, I guess. Anyway, I ended up telling her that I wasn't sure I could bring myself to leave Ron after all. And she said not to worry, that she'll write me and let me know everything that happens, and she said that she'll look out for him... And then she told me she'd arrange it so that we would have all night to talk and be with each other.

How did she do that?

She didn't say how she was going to do it, but just now she pretended to fall asleep on the sofa. I was so embarrassed—it felt so obvious to me. But I told Ron and Harry that I was coming upstairs to finish packing, and I just ran up here. I *know* Ron will follow me.

Yes. Don't you want him to?

Of course. I'm just... you know. Afraid.

Of what?

Of...

?

My self control. Or lack thereof. Oh, Gwen, do I have to spell it out?

Not at all, that's quite sufficient. I wouldn't worry, Hermione—you and Ron have talked that out. I'm sure he'll respect your wishes.

Gwen, don't say anything. But the trouble is, I'm not sure what my wishes are. I want... him. And then again, I'm just not ready—if I were, then I wouldn't be worrying over it like this. I wouldn't be asking myself if it's the right time—my mother always said "If you have to ask the question, then you already know the answer."

I wish I could talk to her.

Oh, Hermione. I'm so sorry.

But I can't. So you have to tell me. You have to tell me how I'll know when it's time.

The truth?

Of course.

You'll just know.

I knew you'd say something completely bloody unhelpful like that.

Yes, I do what I can.

Honestly.

You know, you really ought to use that language in front of Ron—that would certainly distract him from... various other pursuits.

Oh yes, aren't you clever. Well, I'm glad you're so entertained since I—Oh, Gwen. I have to go.

What?

He's on the steps, I hear him—oh no. Oh yes. Oh help.

Oh, the number of times you have shut me on an unbelievable cliffhanger.

Goodnight Gwen!

Good luck, Hermione.

Hermione closed the diary and quickly put out the light. She would pretend to be asleep—yes, that was it. Ron would come in, see she was asleep, and slide into the bed beside her. He'd hold her in his long arms, and everything would be just fine; she willed her heart to stop racing and tightly shut her eyes when she heard the door creak open.

"Hermione?" came Ron's voice, in a whisper.

She didn't answer. She heard the door slowly shut, then footsteps padded across the wood floor. She knew he was standing over her, trying to discern whether she was awake or not. He didn't speak again, but a moment later Hermione felt the bed sag next to her where Ron had just climbed into it. Her breath began to shorten into flighty little gasps and she knew it was a giveaway that she was awake, but there was nothing she could do to regulate it. She felt a thrill, waiting for him to dare something. It was dark. Ginny had made it clear that she wasn't coming upstairs. And this was their last night together for three months. What had she said to him, the day they'd fought? *Wouldn't you want to make the most of it...*

"Don't go." Ron's voice was right next to her ear, he was pushing her hair aside and she was trying to figure out how not to make any noises that she wouldn't want the rest of the house to hear.

"Please stop saying that," she whispered back. "Ron—are you *trying* to hurt me?"

Ron might have thought she meant that he was hurting her by telling her not to go, but that wasn't it. Hermione was actually in pain—because what Ron was doing to her jaw line with his mouth was more or less killing her—but in such a way that she wouldn't have dreamed of stopping him.

"Are you trying to hurt *me*?" he murmured back.

She wondered if he meant the same thing.

Instinctively, she turned her head and found his mouth with her own—it was amazing, the way he seemed to be able to anticipate what she was going to do with her lips, and arrive in the right places. Her head was spinning. It felt like a landslide, and all they had done was kiss. Hurriedly, unsure she'd be able to stop herself if they ventured any further, Hermione broke away and breathed heavily for a moment.

He was at her ear right away—he wasn't letting her go anywhere. "I'm going to miss you," he said in a low voice that made her shiver. Still, she managed to smirk slightly in the darkness. For someone who had never managed to do his homework, Ron certainly knew exactly what the answers were, in certain circumstances.

"I'm going to miss you, too," she whispered back, keeping her head turned away so that all he could get at was her neck. He did a good job of it.

"No you're not," he mumbled, "you're going to get all carried away out there."

"No." Hermione sat up abruptly. He sat up as well, and looked at her. The moon was bright enough to light up his eyes in the darkness; she reached up a hand and trailed her fingers on his face, over the bruise that Malfoy had left there. It killed her to look at it and know that someone had hurt him deliberately—someone right across the street and in her reach, someone she could out-duel in five seconds flat. Ron thought he was the only one who wanted to punch people.

"I'm really, really going to miss you," she said softly. "I want you to know that." She brushed his hair back from his forehead and looked at him.

Ron shut his eyes and leaned into her hand. "What will you miss, then?" he asked.

"You, making me laugh."

"Do I make you laugh?"

Not even meaning to prove it, Hermione laughed and dropped her hand from his hair. "Oh, please," she said, "you know you do."

He opened his eyes and looked into hers. "What else?"

Hermione thought a moment. "Your arms," she ventured quietly. She knew it was a dangerous thing to say—she wasn't surprised when he wrapped them around her. She gave a soft little cry and pressed herself close to him. "Your arms, just like this—this... just this."

They breathed together, feeling each other's chests rising and falling.

"Can you believe Harry?" Ron finally said, tightening his arms around her.

"No," Hermione sighed.

"Not wanting to play Seeker. For the *Cannons*."

It amazed Hermione, the way Ron could make the Chudley Cannons a part of their most intimate moments. She hid a smile in his shoulder. "He just wants to do the right thing," she said, after a moment. "You know how he is."

"Yeah, he's an idiot."

"Ron... just look out for him."

"Of course." One of his big hands played with her hair. "If I *can*... that is, if I'm here. Depending on what happens."

"Nothing bad will happen to you." Hermione kissed his neck, and left her mouth against his skin, trying to ignore the cold fear that touched her heart at the idea of Ron on trial against Malfoy. She held him tighter. No one would take him away from her. Ever. "You're innocent."

"Yeah. And Sirius'll make sure everybody knows it." Ron paused. "I can feel your heart beating," he murmured absently. The words went through Hermione like a shot. He really did know what to say in certain circumstances. She slumped on his shoulder, feeling tears come into her eyes.

"What is it?" he asked, surprise in his voice, when suddenly Hermione was sniffing quite audibly.

"I d-don't want to leave," she said, in a very small voice.

Ron didn't answer.

It angered her that he wouldn't answer—he *knew* what she needed him to say. She needed him to tell her that she had to go, that he knew she had to go, that it was part of who she was and he understood it. But he wouldn't. He wasn't going to encourage her. Did he think that it had been an easy decision to make? Did he think she wanted to leave him, especially under the circumstances? It wasn't about that. It wasn't about *him*. And she couldn't explain herself any more than she already had.

Hermione began to detach herself from him, taking down her arms and turning away to stand up and go to the other bed, but Ron was too quick for that. He caught her, held her there, and buried his face in her hair again. Before she could protest, his mouth had found her ear—her cheek—her lips—her neck again and then her collarbone, never letting up. She fought to stay angry but he'd lit a small fire where the anger had been, and his hands were running up and down the length of her back—his mouth touched the hollow of her throat—his hair tickled her chin.

"Ron..." Her earlier sniffing was forgotten, it had been replaced with sharp, inward gasps of air. She grabbed hold of his shoulders and dug her fingers into the muscles there as he lowered her back onto her pillows, blue eyes naked in their intent. She whimpered slightly, not sure of her own strength, and wondered if she even wanted to say no. It was the last night. It was *Ron*. She knew she loved him.

Ron was pulling her nightdress aside, opening two of the little buttons, revealing her shoulder. Hermione felt his breath snake beneath the cotton neckline, and she nearly fainted with pleasure when he kissed her skin, brushing his lips from side to side, covering the whole exposed area. She clung on and pressed her eyes shut, saying nothing to stop him, until Ron slowly trailed his mouth

toward the place where her chest began to slope forward.

Hermione's eyes flew open. This was more than they had done together yet and she could feel where it was leading.

"Ron, no—we can't—not with everybody home—not yet—don't—" The words were out of her mouth before she'd made the choice in her mind, and she felt a strange sense of relief, knowing that she still had possession of herself.

"Shh," Ron whispered, and the sensation of sound made goosebumps on her skin. "Don't worry, I wasn't going to try *that*, I know you want to wait."

"Well then what are you—"

"Tell me to stop if you want." He lifted his face to touch his lips to hers. "Honestly I will. But if you're really leaving tomorrow," he muttered, the words against her mouth making her shudder, "just let me give you something to remember me by..."

He gave her several moments to think, then pulled back and hovered above her, waiting for her answer. Hermione searched his face, and her heart.

She nodded briefly, watching his expression shift from hope to disbelief before she shut her eyes again. He'd stop. She knew him.

The next thing she felt was a kiss so powerful that she nearly lost her hearing—Ron's mouth had deep hold of hers and she forgot that there was such a thing as breathing.

"I love you," he gasped, when he broke off, and began to trail his mouth down her neck once more... and over her collarbone... and then across skin that he'd never touched or seen.

Hermione jerked and clapped a hand over her own mouth—whatever sound she wanted to make was certainly not coherent speech. Her vocabulary was gone; her brain had shut off. Ron was inside every one of her senses, and she gave herself over to all of it, trusting him to keep his word.

He did.

* * * * *

The next morning was unusually cold for so early in September—or maybe it was just that Hermione hogged blankets like a champ. Ron reached over and tugged some back, trying in vain to get them to cover his body and his feet.

"Stop wiggling around," Hermione mumbled, and fitted back against him.

"You've got all the covers pinned under you."

Hermione rolled toward him at once, bringing the blankets with her. She threw them sleepily over the top of him, and lay her head on his shoulder. "I'm sorry... were you cold all night?" She tucked an arm around his bare chest, and sighed. "I don't want to wake up."

"Don't then." He kissed her hair. It surprised Ron, how comfortable it was to sleep next to her, and be with her. It felt strangely grown up, but so entirely natural that he couldn't believe they hadn't been allowed to do it for years. They'd never dared try, at the Burrow, but last night he'd had a chance to find the right angle against her, figure out where to fit his arms, and sleep without losing contact with her body. It was something, to wake up next to Hermione Granger, with a leg draped over her hip. Really something.

"I have to." She pulled her arm away and made to get out of bed.

Ron made an instinctive, whining sort of sound, and quickly rolled toward her, clutching her there with her back pressed to him.

"Ron..."

"No."

"You can't keep me here like this forever."

"Guess that's true... go on, then, get up."

"It's a bit difficult with my arms pinned."

"What, can't Little Miss Thinker work out a way to escape from the local bartender?"

Hermione started to laugh. "You make us sound sordid."

"We *are*."

"Oh, stop it." She wriggled, trying to get away. "Ron, honestly, let me go."

"First, promise you'll write me the second you get there."

"Of course I will." She yanked at her arms, but Ron kept them fastened in his own and grinned into her neck. She could outdo him with a wand, but hand-to-hand combat was definitely his territory. "I'll kick," she threatened, after a moment.

Ron grabbed her legs in a vise with his, enjoying that this was the nature of the game. "Don't give the enemy a *warning*," he taunted. "Didn't Moody teach you anything?"

Hermione giggled and uselessly fought him, but their playfulness didn't last long. Within minutes, she had given up and sighed. "Ron... the longer we wait, the harder it is."

His heart gave a terrible thud. Feeling suddenly sick to his stomach, Ron relaxed his grip and let Hermione get up. She took her clothes and robes and knapsack, doubled back for her diary with an arch look at him, and left the room. Moments later, he heard the shower running.

She was really going to leave.

He lay on his back, listening to the water run, thinking about the previous night in slow, exacting detail. He wanted to carry it around with him every day, while she was gone. It had been past imagination. And it was going to have to get him through until Christmas.

His thoughts were so engrossing that he never heard the water shut off, and it was another half-hour before he heard two separate doors shutting along the hall. Everyone else was awake. He should probably move, before Ginny came up here and tried to get into her room.

"Ron?" It was too late. Ginny softly knocked at the door. "You might want to come out. I think Hermione's all set."

Ron scrambled to his feet and threw on his T-shirt, then let Ginny in without looking her in the eye. He didn't know how much girls told each other, but she was his sister, and he liked to pretend that she neither knew what he did, nor did anything herself. He went quickly past to the bathroom, where he brushed his teeth before heading down the stairs. Hermione was waiting in the front room, dressed, with her knapsack on the floor beside her.

"I've said goodbye to everyone else," she said simply.

Ron went to the knapsack and picked it up, pretending to be thrown off-balance by its astounding lightness. "Where're the books?" he demanded. "You have another suitcase around here, or something?"

"I'm not bringing any books. Just that."

Completely baffled, Ron said nothing. He weighed the knapsack in his hands again before managing; "You'll need more than this for four months."

"No, I won't." She held out a hand for the bag; Ron gave it to her, and she slung it diagonally across her body. "Okay..." she attempted. "Well..."

For the first time in years, Ron had no idea what to say to her. Certainly not, 'I'll miss you.' There weren't words for the kind of missing he was going to do, and apparently she felt the same way, because she reached out and grabbed both of his hands without another word. He had a feeling that she was trying to smile bravely—the look on her face was halfway there. It was just the look in her eyes that was dark and sad.

"I guess..." she began, half-heartedly.

A sharp *rap!* on the window behind her made both of them jump.

"Owl," Ron muttered, letting it in. He'd never seen it before. It was silver, sleek, expensive-looking, and had the sharpest beak he'd ever seen. It wasn't a public owl and it didn't stay a moment longer than necessary; when Ron had untied the letter from its ankle, it pushed off from his hand with rude force.

"Malfoy," Hermione whispered, staring at the back of the letter.

Ron turned it over in his hands, and in the silver wax, an impressive seal had indeed been stamped: an enormous, Gothic 'M', exactly like the one from Draco's ring. "I knew he really would," he mumbled to himself, tearing open the parchment and reading its contents without even needing to. "Summons," he finally managed, his voice dry. "Formal charges, I'm called to trial, and there it is."

Hermione removed her knapsack and threw it on a chair. "I'll go and get Sirius," she said anxiously, moving to the stairs.

"No, wait."

She turned and looked at him, pale with worry. "Wait?" she repeated faintly.

"Put your bag back on and go. I'll handle this."

Her eyebrows shot up and she came toward him again, shaking her head. "I can't go now," she protested. "How could I? I'll postpone Cortona until after this is all worked out—"

"No. The Thinker might have another apprentice by then. You can't stay." Ron couldn't believe he was saying it. He wanted her to stay more than anything, and finally it looked like she was going to go ahead and do it.

She stood in front of him with her hands on her hips. "I'm not leaving," she said stoutly. "I'm not going off and letting Malf—"

Ron kissed her, hard, cutting off the words. "I don't want your plans ruined because of Malfoy." He cleared his throat and took her hands, looking down at her fingers as he spoke. "And... and

you've stood right by me on everything important. " He took a deep breath, and said what he knew full well she'd been waiting to hear. "I want you to have whatever you want. I want you to go to the Thinker." He'd never told a bigger lie in his life.

Strangely, however, it was also the truth.

Hermione went very still, and gripped his hands in her little ones. "Thank you," she finally whispered. When she looked up at him, her eyes were full of tears, but she let go of his hands and picked up her knapsack. "Goodbye, Ron," she managed.

Ron felt his chin tremble. "Goodbye, Hermione."

She tilted up her face and he met her in a kiss so long and sweet that he wasn't sure he could bear to let her go, after all. But when she stepped back and pulled her wand, looking at him in a way she never had before, he knew that they were both doing the right thing. The difficult thing—but then, they'd learned that rule from Dumbledore.

"I love you," she choked.

Ron opened his mouth to say it back—and blinked. Hermione had already disappeared into thin air. He stared uncomprehendingly at the place where she'd just been, then dropped his gaze to the letter in his hands, hoping to make some sense of the summons—to take his mind off the terribly empty spot in the room.

But he couldn't read it, through the tears.

After Practice

When the last of the players had Disappeared from the pitch, contracts in hand, Oliver sighed happily. "Damn satisfied," he muttered to himself, grinning. "That's a winning team right there." He pulled his wand, getting rid of the table that had previously held the season contracts, then picked up his duffel bag and hefted it over his shoulder. For once, he wasn't going to stay and practice on his own. For once, he just wanted to drop off the ball-box at home, take a long shower, and celebrate.

There was a sound of struggling chain and a *whoosh!* of concentrated wind near his left ear. Oliver's head snapped up and he saw a Bludger sail into the wide, grey sky—he felt a split-second of panic over how it had got free of its restraints, before he saw a body on broomstick shoot upwards after it.

Oliver crossed his arms admiringly and watched Maureen climb into the cool air, her short, brunette ponytail whipping against her neck. When the Bludger came toward her, she didn't even flinch—merely pivoted, raised her bat, and swung. The *smack!* rang out in the wet morning air, and the irate Quidditch ball spiraled away from the pitch. When it returned and made an even fiercer beeline toward Maureen's head, she waited until it was almost too close and then clocked it so hard that Oliver couldn't even tell where it had gone.

"Nicely done!" he called up. Maureen tossed her head, and didn't look at him. Oliver didn't mind that—she was a proud girl and generally preferred to be left on her own to work out. Still, he knew she liked the compliments, and when she knocked the Bludger out of bounds again, he grinned. "Should've been looking at you for Beater!" he hollered.

To his surprise, Maureen glared ferociously down at him. "Go home," she yelled back. "Let me alone, would you?"

Oliver frowned. She was in a tetchy mood. "Can't," he shouted up. "Have to bring the balls home. Come on, give it here."

"I'll bring 'em myself—" Maureen thwacked at the Bludger recklessly and Oliver registered shock. It was coming right for him. Nimbly, he sidestepped it, and narrowed his eyes up at his girlfriend. If he was right—and he often was—then she was taking the season roster personally.

"Maureen!" he barked. "I thought we talked about this."

She gave him such a furious look that he actually backed up two steps though she was nowhere near him.

"Believe me, Oliver," she panted, effortlessly beating the returned Bludger out of her face, "you *want* me to take this out on the Bludger. Now go home—you're getting on my nerves."

She raised her bat and smacked the Bludger straight toward him for the second time. Oliver scowled. And then, before he'd really thought it through, he intercepted the Bludger and wrestled it back into the box, strapping it down with practiced ease.

"Give. That. Here." Maureen had come to a hover just a few feet from his head. Her foot was dangerously close to his temple, and Oliver wondered if she'd use it.

"No," he shot back, opening the little doors that caged the Golden Snitch. He plucked it out of its casing and tossed it as hard as he could into the air, where it spread its silvery wings and fluttered rapidly away. He met Maureen's waiting stare. "*That's* the one you ought to be practicing with," he leveled.

Her mouth dropped open, and Oliver braced himself for the kind of foul words he generally only heard from weathered athletes of the male variety. But instead of cursing him, Maureen's lower lip trembled. It was just a second of insecurity, but it was enough. Oliver felt a shred of guilt worm its way into the back of his mind.

"Maureen..."

But she was already gone—up and across the pitch, faster than he'd ever seen her move. And when she dove, he actually gasped. It was beautiful, the way she played when she was furious. Just beautiful. She got a tremendous look on her face when the only thing she wanted in the world was the Golden Snitch—it put Oliver in mind of the first time he'd seen her play.

He'd gone to that Bats game to see Hull Huntington catch the Snitch, and had been sorely disappointed to find that the famous Seeker's wife had gone into labor that morning.

"He's *not* in labor, is he?" he distinctly remembered muttering to his teammate Connor, from Puddlemere. "*Some player, missing a game just for that.*"

"D'you even want to stay?" Connor had asked, annoyed. "*I've never heard of this guy—M. Knight... of course, Pete Braun's Seeking for the Falcons and he's tight—and hey, if the Bats don't win it, we're in a much better position to take on the Magpies for the League.*"

"*Might as well stay, yeah,*" Oliver had sighed. "*Never hurts to watch a game of Quid-ditch.*"

"...and first reserve Seeker, Maureen Knight!" the announcer had hollered.

"Oh, great," Connor had groaned. "A girl."

"Shut it," Oliver remembered saying hotly. "*Some of my best players at school were girls. Alicia Spinnet was fantastic—wouldn't be surprised if you see her in the league one of these days. If they're willing to play their guts out, I don't care if there're cats up there on those brooms.*"

Connor had fallen peevishly silent, and Maureen Knight had taken the field.

Oliver had scrutinized her carefully—as a peer, only. She'd been slim. Perched with total ease on the broom. Good grip, excellent posture—she'd been holding her knees tight together, feet pointed under her broom toward the tail. Oliver's eyebrows had shot up. He'd never seen anybody do that, and it had looked positively aerodynamic.

"*She's sitting funny,*" Connor had said, with a snort. "*What does she think this is, ballet?*"

Oliver hadn't answered. He'd watched, frowning intently, as Maureen had circled the rest of the players, keeping her grip light. Her thumbs had been placed side by side on the broom stem, fingers out to the sides, ready to press down the broom's nose with the heels of her hands as soon as she'd spotted the Snitch. He'd seen that technique once before; Fitz Colbert had done it like that and caught the Snitch in nearly every match he'd ever played. More and more, Oliver had admired Maureen's choices, and for the rest of that match, his eyes had flitted between the Keepers' techniques and the first reserve Seeker of the Ballycastle Bats.

"*It's out—it's up—*" Connor had hissed beside him, after half-an-hour. "*Braun'll have it in a second—*"

Sure enough, Pete Braun had gone into a steep dive, straight down. Luckily for him, he'd been flying directly over the Snitch when it had appeared. Maureen Knight, on the other hand, had been at the far end of the field, and Oliver had felt a pang for her sake, which he had counted odd. First of all, he'd wanted Braun to catch it—a Falcon win would better Puddlemere's odds. Secondly, it was her own fault if she wanted to hover far away from the other Seeker, on the off chance that the Snitch came nearer her end. It was a strategy he'd never encouraged, and he'd been sorry to see that, with all her obvious potential, Maureen had chosen to try it.

"*That girl hasn't got a chance,*" Connor had said, laughing and knocking back the end of his butterbeer. "*Short game, this was.*"

Without warning, Maureen Knight had pressed down on the nose of her broom, and shot directly toward the Snitch with a shock of speed that had got everyone's attention. The stands had fallen into a hush, and then the Bats supporters had got to their feet, screaming. Oliver had found himself gripping the back of the seat in front of him, watching Maureen tunnel through the rest of the players on the field, sending two of the Falcons' Chasers spinning off their courses as she barreled uncompromisingly toward the same spot that Braun had targeted. There had been something in her eyes, and even from far off in the stands, Oliver had recognized it. It was glinting and maniacal, focused and desiring, and Oliver knew it all too well.

"*If she can't catch it, she'll plow for it,*" he'd said softly. "*Watch her.*"

And he'd been right. Braun had reached the Snitch just a split-second before Maureen had managed to get to it, but she'd been speeding without restraint and had no way of pulling back. As the Falcon Seeker's fist had shot victoriously into the air, Maureen Knight had smacked into the pitch and gone unconscious.

"*She's brilliant,*" Oliver remembered whispering, watching a team of sport-mediwizards rush onto the field and float her body away. He'd run out of the stands and gone down to the lockers, and the moment she'd been brought around, he'd demanded an interview. She'd been propped up on a bench against the wall, with a fractured wrist and cheek, covered with grass and mud and blood and bruises.

Two weeks later, he'd asked her to move in with him.

And now she was diving on the practice pitch with all the terrible grace her fury had given her. She had the Snitch in her fist in seconds, and came to a sharp landing on the far side of the field. Without even a glance in Oliver's direction, she shoved the Snitch in the pocket of her practice robes and stalked away from the field.

Oliver sighed, and the sound was snatched away on a breeze. She was evidently hacked off with him for choosing Potter as the first string Seeker. She was doing what they'd promised each other *never* to do, and bringing their relationship to the Quidditch pitch.

It wasn't his problem. She'd get over it and come home soon enough. Oliver shook his head at her retreating back, locked the ball-box and hefted it into his hand, and was about to Disapparate when there was a soft *pop!* from across the field, and a slim, dark-haired lad appeared, looking tense.

"Harry!" Oliver called; grinning so wide he thought his face might split.

Harry Potter spotted him, but did not grin back. Instead he gave a feeble wave with one hand and held up his contract in the other. "Oliver," he said weakly as he approached. "Hullo."

"Back so soon?" Oliver didn't mind Harry's expression. He knew he must be dead nervous. After all, leading the Cannons to the League Championships and catching the Snitch in front of thousands of screaming fans would be no small feat. "Made your decision then?" he said happily. "Bringing back your contract on the spot? That's what I like—dedication!"

Harry seemed to grow paler. "Yeah I've made my... decision." He held out his contract and swallowed. "I'm er..." He looked positively *green*. "I'm so sorry, Oliver, but I won't be able to play for the Cannons this year."

* * * * *

"Oh, *Potter*, you're the best Seeker I've ever *seen*, how do you *do* it, and I'm so lucky that you've come out for *my* team because clearly my girlfriend here doesn't have a flat clue what she's doing. Yes, didn't you know, we've been together for three years and *I've* taught her everything she knows, but she's still not up to standard is she? Tut *tut*.' Bloody ugly arrogant git from hell."

Maureen smacked her broom over her shoulder, never stopping her mutterings for a second. "Making himself Keeper like it's an obvious choice. Hypocrite. Doesn't hold anybody up to the standard he holds me to, not even himself. Ass. My mother told me not to move in with him, and I didn't listen, did I? No. Thought he was the sun and moon. Well not today, Oliver Wood. *Not* today. You can celebrate your bugging winning team all on your own. I'm tired."

She flopped down on the side of the hill, a hundred meters from the pitch, and lay on her back staring up at the flat, grey sky. She knew that, from here, Oliver couldn't see her. She also knew him well enough to be certain that he wouldn't come after her anyway—he wasn't the type. He'd be home by now, in the shower, singing himself a victory song, and that was fine. Maureen wasn't the type to *want* him following, apologizing all over himself. It wasn't what a person said afterward. It was the way a person acted, during. She'd always felt that way; apologies just made her angrier. It was part of what she'd always found so refreshing and cool, about Oliver. He never spent time apologizing for anything—he just got it right.

Only that had been happening less and less, lately. Maureen squeezed her eyes shut and sighed, deeply regretting her decision to leave the Ballycastle Bats. She and Oliver should never have combined their professional lives; she'd known in her bones that it could only bring trouble.

She lay on her back for a long time, feeling the dew seep through her robes to her skin. It actually helped to calm her. She loved the open field. She loved everything about it: the smell, the mud, the way the wind could blow a person off course, the way the rain interfered with vision and made the game more challenging. She loved the stands and the yelling of the crowd—though it wasn't applause that drove her to catch the Snitch, and it never had been. It was just a crazy, deep-rooted need. She didn't know where it came from and she didn't care; she just obeyed it.

That was another thing about Oliver—he didn't care about the glory of winning. It was the winning *itself* that drove him. Just knowing that he was the best damn Keeper that his mind and body would let him be, and the satisfaction of stopping the difficult goal-shots, was enough for him. She'd seen him as happy in practice scrimmages as in games. He was in it for Quidditch. Just Quidditch. He

was in it for the joy of the fight, and the camaraderie of the team. That was the *only* reason she'd let him persuade her to leave the Bats and resurrect the Cannons.

"And if a better Keeper than I am, or a better Seeker than you are, comes out to those trials..." he'd said gravely, perched on the arm of their sofa in their little flat, gesticulating down to where she sat at the opposite end—he was always making pre game speeches, even when there were no games in sight *"... then we'll have to let that be what it is. We can't let our feelings for each other interfere in making this the best team of the season. The whole point of this project is making a comeback, just to see if it's possible—and if we're going to make that happen, then we've got to keep objective, right?"*

Maureen had agreed wholeheartedly. She wasn't stingy that way. Of course it was only natural that she'd wanted to be the first string Seeker, but when Harry Potter had come out and raced her for it, she'd almost *instructed* Oliver to give the spot to the boy. Potter was better than she was; that wasn't the issue.

The issue was that her boyfriend was a Class A, Non-Tradable Prat.

She lay there for a good two hours, wallowing in regret and anger, before she finally got bored with staying still. The sun was high and fairly hot, even behind the unbroken blanket of clouds, and Maureen got to her feet. She wasn't going to lie here and break a sweat for no good reason. She was going to practice, damn him, and she was going to enjoy it.

She fished the little golden orb out of her pocket and looked at it almost lovingly. Not many people understood that sort of emotional attachment to a ball. Oliver did. Potter seemed to. She liked Harry; he appeared to be a decent kid—and he was more than decent, if his history was anything to go by. Fifty percent of her was purely happy for him, snagging the Seeker spot. Forty percent was disappointed.

Ten percent was just plain hacked off, but that had nothing to do with Potter. Maureen flung the Snitch into the sky, watched as the silver wings unfurled and shivered with speed, and shot into the air a moment later, happy to concentrate on nothing but the little, bewitched ball.

It was mid-afternoon when she landed, and she still hadn't burnt off all her anger, but she was too exhausted to keep flying. Still, when she shut her eyes and Disapparated, she didn't go straight home.

"Hey, Weasley," she said, edging up to the bar of the Snout's Fair where she'd just appeared, startling a couple of customers out of their stools.

"Hey, Knight." The tall, redheaded bartender was getting to be sort of a chum of hers. He was another decent kid, Ron Weasley. And he'd done plenty of the same that Potter had, with a lot less of the credit.

"I need a shot of the Curse, and a Madman to wash it down." Maureen sat on the one empty stool and leaned her broom against the bar. "And then I need another shot, and another Madman. And then I need another shot."

"I know the feeling," he muttered back, and turned around with her drinks in his hands.

She gasped at the sight of him. "That's some bruise," she exclaimed, wincing at the black and purple monstrosity that eclipsed a good part of the right side of Weasley's face. "How'd you get it?"

"Fell off my broom."

"No!"

"No." Weasley didn't seem in the mood to chat about it, and she didn't want to press. He clapped the bottle and glass on the bar, but waved her off when she tried to pay him. "On the house."

"Oh, really? To what do I owe the honor?" Maureen joked, and then remembered that he would have heard about Potter's success. "Celebrating the new Seeker, are we? Yeah. I'll absolutely drink to that."

Weasley gave her a funny look, but didn't say anything as she downed her shot and followed it with a swig of Madman.

"He deserved it," Maureen continued, slapping the bottle on the bar. "He gave me a run for my money, and I'll be happy to step in if he ever needs a day off to, you know, face down a Dark Lord, or anything."

Weasley snorted, in spite of the serious look on his face. "Then you haven't heard?" he asked quietly. "I don't know if I'm the one to tell you."

Maureen sat up straight, fear shooting through her. "What is it—something about Voldemort? Another Dementor?"

Weasley quickly shook his head. "No—no. Sorry. It's just..." He pushed a freckled hand through his red hair, and grimaced. "Harry's not playing. He's declined the contract. He's... he's going to work for the Ministry, instead."

Stunned silent, Maureen sat there, staring at the label on her Madman. A filthy-looking man

dressed as a pirate winked at her from the enchanted illustration. She watched him wink for a long time. "He's not playing," she finally repeated.

"S'right." Weasley let out a brief, shallow sigh. "Turned down the Cannons." He reached up and touched the bruise on his face. "Bollocky couple of days," he muttered, and then looked at Maureen in horror. "Though I'm happy for you, of course," he said quickly. "Good job, and all that, you being Seeker. I'm now officially your number one fan—pretty soon your mug'll be plastered all over my walls."

Maureen couldn't think of an answer for that. "Does... Oliver know?" she asked, afraid to hear the answer.

"Yeah. Harry went over and told him first thing."

Alarm bells went off in Maureen's brain, telling her not to go home, not to go near him until he'd had a chance to work it off. But she didn't heed them. "I've got to go." She finished the Madman in one long chug and wiped her mouth on the sleeve of her practice robes. She was about to Disapparate, but Weasley looked absolutely despondent, and she was moved to reach across the bar and pat his arm. "Hey... I'm sorry about Potter."

"Yeah. Me too." He picked at a bit of dried wax that had dripped onto the bar.

"Tell you what—if you're really my number one fan, what do you say to season tickets?"

Weasley looked up, half-smiling. "You don't have to do that."

"Yeah, I know." Maureen grinned. "But there'll be a pair of them under your name at every game. And when we get to the Leagues, just tell me how many people you want to bring and I'll do my best, right?"

He smiled. "Thanks. I appreciate that."

"Cool. See you there." Maureen gave her wand a twist and Apparated into the flat she shared with Oliver.

It was a nice flat: big, roomy, wooden-floored and cozy, with lots of light and an enormous library of strategy notebooks and tactical manuals. On one wall of the front room were mounted all the racing brooms that Oliver had owned since he was six. On the other wall, Maureen kept hers—and she was always quick to point out, when they were cleaning and restoring these, that *her* first broom had been flown at the age of *five*. There was one big bedroom off the living area; they had a good-sized bathroom, and a spotless little kitchen. Partly, it was spotless because neither of them cooked. Partly it was because, unlike most of the men Maureen had dated, Oliver wasn't a terrible mess; he didn't have time to make messes, since he was usually out at the field. There was always an enormous pile of sweaty laundry, but he generally kept it to the bin, and since hers was just as bad, it wasn't as if it warranted complaint. Oliver *did* seem to find it simpler to wait until the Laundry Charm Fairy appeared in the flat than to do a few wand waves of his own, but on the whole he was fairly tidy.

It was strange, therefore, to note that there was a massive sort of mess at the side of the living room table. Oliver had heaped his bag, his notebooks, his clipboard and his whistle on the floor. His shoes were there. His muddy robes were thrown beside them. Even more disturbing was the sight of his Firebolt 2, tossed recklessly across the couch instead of hung perfectly in its specially crafted and aerodynamics-enhancing wall clips. Maureen frowned at the mess, cringed at the abandoned broom, and then stopped short, her mouth hanging open.

Bottles. Empty ones. Five of them. On the table. They'd been full of Flood Light and *somebody* had drunk them all. To be sure, Flood Light was a beer that Maureen refused to drink because it was an insult to her taste buds and her pride, a beer most wizards wouldn't be caught dead drinking, a beer for witches on diets, a beer whose motto read "When You're Lookin' For Summat Stronger than Water!" But for Oliver to drink five bottles of anything, even butterbeer, was a full-out alcoholic binge of the most pathetic variety.

Maureen continued to gape at the five empty bottles, wondering dimly where the sixth one was—and then she went still, listening. For the first time, she registered the sound of running water, coming from the back of the flat. And suddenly, over the sound of water hitting tile, she could barely make out a broken sort of wail.

* * * * *

"How could he do it?" Oliver moaned for the five hundredth time, letting his head fall heavily against the wet shower tiles. "How could he give up *Quidditch*? After all summer... after all the drills... he's going to go... be some sort of... flying animal keeper..." Oliver sighed heavily, sobbed once, and reached for his washcloth. He did not need to wash up any further; he'd been in the shower for a solid half hour, and was perfectly clean. However, he slapped drunkenly at himself with the washcloth for a while, letting his tears mingle with the falling shower spray, until he realized he

hadn't used any soap. He reached for some, but his depth perception failed, and the slippery bar skidded out of his grasp and fell between his feet with a thud. Oliver bent over and groped around near the drain until—

“OW! OH, BLOODY HELL!”

The water had gone suddenly and wickedly hot, raining down on him in a merciless, burning sheet, making him yowl and forget the soap altogether. He stumbled—he fell—his head smacked against the shower door and pushed it open; he tumbled through it onto the bathroom floor.

Oliver flinched at the pain and tried to focus through the haze that beer had cast over his senses. The floor was cold under his temple—his feet were still in the shower, under the spray of water, which had mercifully returned to its regular temperature. When his head stopped spinning and he could see straight, he realized that there were shoes in front of his face. He blinked at them. Quidditch shoes. Maybe he'd taken his off and left them at the foot of the toilet.

But no... One of the shoes was tapping slightly. Someone was *in* the shoes. Oliver rolled over on his back—it took a lot of effort—and looked up, panting.

“Maureen... You're home...”

She was standing, her hand on the toilet flusher, looking down at him in what seemed to be angry shock. In one hand, she held the remains of his sixth bottle of Flood Light.

“What the hell are you doing?” she demanded.

Oliver let out another sob before he could help it. “Mourning,” he croaked. “You don't know... what's happened...” He sniffled, tried to pull himself together, and failed. “Our team—our beautiful team—” he managed, before losing his voice to the tears.

Maureen slammed the bottle on the sink. She stepped unfeelingly over him and turned off the taps, then yanked a towel from the cabinet and threw it on top of him. “Get up,” she said, her voice very low. “And get dressed. And while you're doing that, think of a way to apologize to me for the way you're *weeping* about my being the *Seeker*!” She sounded close to tears herself as she whirled around, fled the bathroom, and slammed the door behind her.

Oliver sat bolt upright, knocking the side of his head on the toilet as he did so and cursing loudly. He pushed himself up to standing and began to towel off, trying to make sense of what she'd just said. She seemed... upset. Angry. Oliver wrapped the towel around his waist, his fingers fumbling to tuck in the end, and reached for the half-full sixth bottle that Maureen had kindly left for him. So she couldn't be *that* angry. He polished it off and dropped it in the little waste bin, and went into their bedroom to get dressed.

He was not too drunk to notice, upon entering the room, that his suitcase was open on the bed. Nor did he miss the fact that Maureen was tearing his robes out of the closet and throwing them into the suitcase, three at a time.

“What d'you think you're doing?” Oliver demanded furiously.

“Kicking you out.” Maureen's voice was thick, but her ponytail swung around her face and obscured her expression.

“It's my flat!” Oliver said incredulously.

“Oh no you don't!” Maureen whirled on him. Now he could see that her eyes were wet and bloodshot and that her mouth was trembling. “You said when I moved in that it was *our* flat now, and if you think I'm going home to my mother, then you can think again.”

“Well where am I supposed to go?” Oliver thought of something else. “And hey! Why are you kicking me out?”

Maureen laughed, though it sounded more like she was crying. “Oh, come on, Oliver, this has been coming since July. I should *never* have left the Bats.” She swiped beneath her eyes, went to his bedside table, and began to empty it, too, into the suitcase. “It was a bad idea on both of us.”

Panic raced through Oliver's brain. “You—you're not going back to the Bats?” he breathed in terror. “Maureen, I haven't got another reserve, it's just you—you're it—you can't leave the—”

“Oh, I'm not leaving the Cannons.” Maureen tossed her head. “I'm just not living with you.” She chucked his miniature Quidditch field game—a gift from Fred and George Weasley—into the suitcase, and slammed it shut.

Oliver stood, stunned, looking at the suitcase. “You're having me on,” he finally said.

“I'm not.”

“Well—” Oliver made a huffing sound and put his hands on his towel-clad hips. “I don't see why I should have to go—”

“I can't live with you and play Quidditch for you, Oliver. I can't.”

“Fine time to make up your mind about that! Look, I'm not upset because you're the Seeker, I'm just miserable that Potter isn't!”

"Same thing."

Oliver exploded. "IT'S NOT! YOU'RE MAKING THIS WORSE! AND YOU'RE BREAKING OUR RULE!"

"What, no bringing the relationship to the pitch?" Maureen's eyes narrowed. "Give me a break. You've been harder on me than any other player, all summer long. You've treated me like some sort of novice. You've given Potter twice the respect you've given me. And you'd never've been so callous about congratulating Potter in front of another reserve—you would have been tactful if it was anyone but me—so don't try telling me that our relationship didn't come out there!"

Oliver sank into the chair by the closet and searched himself for an answer to that one. He knew there was a way to get out of this... if only he were sober, he'd be able to put his finger on it. Maureen stayed perfectly still, watching him, her arms folded across her chest.

"Maureen..." Oliver finally attempted, "...I know you're going to be a brilliant Seeker..."

"No."

"Well bloody hell, woman! What do you want me to say?"

"Nothing. I want you to get dressed and go shack up with one of your friends until the season's over."

Oliver leapt to his feet so fast that his towel fell off. "YOU WANT ME TO LEAVE UNTIL THE SPRING?"

Maureen surveyed him from head to toe and sighed. "You have to go," she said quietly, after a moment, looking as if she didn't quite want him to leave after all. "You want to win, don't you?"

"Of course!"

"Well so do I. And I won't want to win for you if you're needling me all season about things I should be doing better. I'll want to win for *me*, but I'll sabotage it to get at you. Your coaching is one thing on the field—that, I can handle—but it's another at home and I don't think you'll be able to stop yourself. And I don't think I can stand—" here, she sucked in a deep breath, "—hearing you wail that Potter could have done it, if I miss. It hurts my feelings too much, Oliver."

"But Maureen, I wouldn't."

"You just did, in the bathroom. Our team?" she reminded him. "Our beautiful team?"

"But I... I've been drinking! I didn't know what I was saying."

Maureen hesitated, then crossed toward the closet. For a second, Oliver thought she was coming over to make it up with him, but she didn't touch him at all—instead, she reached into the closet and handed him a spare set of robes. "You said what you really thought," she said, looking him the eye. "I knew you'd be upset about this when I found out—I mean, I know I'm not quite the Seeker Potter is—but I hoped at least you'd have the decency to be pleased for my sake—"

"How'd you find out, anyway?" Oliver interrupted.

"Ron Weasley told me, at the pub."

"Oh, Ron *Weasley* is it?" Oliver spat, suddenly feeling very jealous. "Bit young, isn't he?" he muttered under his breath.

It had been the wrong thing to say. Maureen's eyes narrowed into slits. "*He* was miserable about Potter," she said, her voice deadly quiet. "And he has a right to be. But he still had the presence of mind to wish me congratulations, because he's *decent*."

Oliver's blood boiled. She was flirting with old housemates of his who were four years his junior, and calling him indecent in the process. "Fine," he muttered, reaching for the suitcase. "Just brilliant. Shittiest day I've ever had."

"Put your robes on."

Oliver did so furiously, struggling into them, too angry to bother with undergarments. "I suppose this is it, then."

Maureen caught a suspicious little breath that made Oliver's head snap up. But she wasn't crying. "I... suppose it is. Yeah."

"You... you don't want me back in the spring, then?" His heart was beating very fast and he found that he was breathing hard. He'd never known a woman like Maureen and he doubted that he ever would again. A woman he could share Quidditch with, a woman who knew the difference between broomtail shapes and diving angles... The mental image of her, diving for the Snitch and plowing into the dirt crossed his mind for the second time that day. She was beautiful. And the thought of splitting up with her was terrible. "Say it's just for the season," he heard himself plead softly. "Come on. You know I love you."

She nodded. "I know." She reached out, grabbed his suitcase, and held it out to him. "But you love Quidditch more."

Oliver opened his mouth to protest, but shut it again quickly. He took the suitcase by the handle

and swung it down to his side, still unable to respond. She might be right.

"See?" She gave a weak smile. "So go on. We're still going to have a winning season. Believe it or not, I *can* catch a Snitch. See you tomorrow at six-oh, and you'll have to bring me a new contract." She was speaking very quickly, shoving him through the bedroom door and toward the front one. She gathered up the mess he'd left by the table, shoved it into his Quidditch bag, and handed that to him as well, along with his broom. "You'll have to walk," she muttered. "You can't Disapparate like this. Too much alcohol."

"Maureen..." He paused in the front door, turned around, and bent his head toward hers. He needed to kiss her goodbye.

She stepped back. "I'm just the Seeker now, Oliver," she managed. "We can't bring our relationship to the pitch if we don't have one. Goodbye."

And as Oliver watched, heartbroken, she softly shut the door in his face.

— CHAPTER NINETEEN —

Islands

When she reached the top of the cliff, Hermione collapsed onto a large rock, threw her rucksack down by her side, and stared out at the blue sea. She had been traveling all day long. Apparating over such long distances was a tricky operation; it required several stops along the way as she passed through various official wizarding zones.

She knew that she was close to the Isle of Cortona, where the Thinker lived. Placing her hand up to her forehead to shield her eyes from the bright afternoon sun, Hermione searched and could just barely make out a tiny island off in the distance. Her heart lurched and she knew without a doubt that it was her final destination. But how would she get there? She didn't dare try to Apparate—if there were wards guarding the island then half of her might end up floating in the ocean while the other half struggled on a rock. She supposed she should stroll down to the village and try to find a Muggle with a boat to sail her out there. Unfortunately, she was no longer in England and striking a deal with a Greek-speaking fisherman did not seem like the most efficient option.

At the moment, she was simply tired, and doubt was beginning to creep up inside her, along with a terrible pang of homesickness when she thought of Ron. She wondered how she would feel about herself, if, after coming this far, she decided just to turn around and go home.

Home. Hermione remembered that she didn't really have a home. Her parents were in St. Mungo's, frozen in terror, and would stay that way unless she found a way to help them. With determination, she stood, threw her bag over her shoulder, and headed back down the path towards the village.

Halfway down she noticed a small spout sticking out of the vegetation in the hillside. She did not remember seeing it on her way up and she now realized that she was extremely thirsty. A small ladle and tin cup sat on a rock near the spring. Hermione had seen similar set-ups when she had traveled to France with her parents in the summer after her second year at Hogwarts. She assumed that all of the villagers used this spring to collect water during their walks. Holding out her hands to steady herself, she placed one foot on a rock in front of her, and reached out to pick up the ladle, gleaming in the sunlight.

As soon as she touched it, she knew. A familiar jerking motion tugged at her stomach and she felt her feet leave the ground. A Portkey. The ladle was a Portkey and Hermione was very afraid. Her mind flashed to the Triwizard Tournament, when a Portkey had unexpectedly sent Harry and Cedric Diggory directly into Voldemort's hands. She tried to drop the ladle, but it was too late—she was already spinning. A moment later, however, she landed on solid ground.

Dropping the ladle, Hermione brushed herself off and looked around. She seemed to be—well—in some sort of paradise. It was very, very quiet except for a few birdsongs, the hum of some insects, and the sea. She could see the water to her right and far off to her left, and with a sigh of relief, she assumed that somehow she had landed on the Isle of Cortona.

A large villa stood in front of her. It did not appear to have walls, but rooms were clearly marked, and the floors were tiled in vibrant mosaic patterns of blue and gold. She could see to the back of the building, and there appeared to be a lot more vegetation away from the beach. She wondered if she should enter the building. Looking around, she saw no one, so, her hand tightly gripping the wand in her pocket, she proceeded onward.

The air inside the villa was much cooler than outside. Once she crossed over the threshold, she realized that there were walls separating the rooms, but they seemed to be made of something magical, for they shimmered and glowed as she walked by. They were covered with murals that reminded Hermione of television more than anything else, because the people and animals in the pictures appeared to be moving and acting out scenes, rather than just standing and waving like in regular wizard pictures.

Hermione tried not to let these things distract her as she wandered through the building. She felt that it was important to keep her mind as focused as possible. A few moments later, she stumbled out onto the back terrace and gasped when she saw the view.

The villa was actually located at the foot of a large hill. Flat, lush, vegetated land spread out in front of her for about a mile, and then, rising up out of it, was a magnificent mountain that Hermione was sure that she had not noticed from the mainland. She was starting to doubt whether the Portkey had transported her to Cortona, or to some other exotic location.

"Welcome," said a voice that was clear and noble, with the slightest trace of an accent.

Hermione jumped and, focusing her eyes, which had gone a bit blurry in the hot sun, realized that there was a tall, dark-haired woman standing not ten feet away from her, amongst what looked like grapevines.

Opening her mouth to speak, Hermione found that nothing wanted to come out of it. She closed it again, and then, taking a deep breath, said firmly, "Hello. Are you—"

"I am Delia, and yes, I am." She smiled at Hermione and for a moment looked very young. Hermione couldn't quite place her age, but she had read somewhere that the current Thinker had been in the position for close to fifty years.

"I'm sorry," Hermione blundered on, taken aback by this relatively warm welcome, "to have arrived unexpectedly—"

"But I was expecting you," interrupted Delia, walking towards Hermione, "I set up the Portkey three days ago."

Hermione furrowed her brow. Perhaps Delia was expecting someone else. "Do you know who I am?" Hermione asked.

"You are Hermione Granger. I received your letter at the beginning of the summer. I do not receive much correspondence here, especially since the death of Albus Dumbledore. It has been very quiet."

"But you never replied!" exclaimed Hermione, unable to hide the exasperation in her voice.

"You are here though, are you not?" Delia asked. There was a hint of a smile around her lips.

"Yes," Hermione said, and summoned her courage. Better to find out the answer now, than to be disappointed later. "You'll... let me stay and train with you?"

Delia smiled fully, but did not answer. "Let's go inside. I think you are tired?"

Realizing that she was, indeed, exhausted, and that she had never managed to take a sip of water, Hermione agreed and allowed Delia to lead her back into the villa.

Delia and Hermione walked through several rooms into a bedroom suite with a washstand, a bed, and a wardrobe. Everything was light and sparse, yet, somehow, very comforting. Opening the wardrobe, Delia pulled out something pale and filmy, resembling the robes that she herself was wearing. She handed them to Hermione and said, "Wear these—they suit the climate much better than that heavy robe of yours. I will wait"—she motioned to a doorway beyond Hermione—"and you come to see me when you are ready."

Hermione knew that her mouth was hanging open, but she was too dazed to care. Delia laid the robes on the bed and left, while Hermione stripped down and scrubbed her face at the washbasin. Then she sat on the bed for a very long time, examining the robes and marveling at how soft they were. Her last set of pretty things had been given to her by her mother—Courtney Granger had insisted on buying her daughter several lovely Muggle dresses to wear in the summers, and Hermione had always enjoyed putting them on and feeling them swish around her legs in the heat. Those dresses had been abandoned in her parents' house, and she'd spent most of the summer in her old jeans and shirts. Finally, she stood and pulled the robes over her head. They felt as though they'd been made especially for her. Moving to stand in front of a mirror on the shimmering wall, Hermione studied her reflection. Well, she still looked like herself, but she *felt* better, and, with a deep, comforting sigh, she turned and walked towards the room where Delia was waiting for her.

Delia insisted on having a small meal while she and Hermione talked. Ripe tomatoes and some sort of soft cheese were sitting on a platter. A bowl nearby contained olives of different colors and another, larger bowl was filled with grapes. Hermione glanced at the food doubtfully—she was very hungry and had a feeling that a few tomatoes were not going to satisfy her hunger. Still, she sat down across from Delia and waited for the Thinker to speak. They ate in silence for what seemed like a very long time.

"Tell me about yourself," Delia finally said, with an encouraging smile.

"Well," began Hermione, her mind racing, "what do you want to know?"

"Oh, tell me anything," said Delia. "Just talk"—her eyes twinkled—"try *not* to think."

"Okay," Hermione replied. She absentmindedly twirled an olive in the tomato juice on her plate.

"I was born to Muggle parents." She stopped. Should she tell Delia about her parents? Even though they were the main reason that she was here, somehow she didn't feel ready to reveal everything. Taking a deep breath, she continued, "But I had a feeling that there was something unusual about me from an early age. I was excited and happy when I got my letter from Hogwarts, but I can't really say that I was surprised—that is, I *was* surprised, but..."

She talked and talked and talked. The light from outside began to dim and Delia casually lit several candles on the table. Hermione cast her mind back to all of the lessons in all of the classes at Hogwarts—she regurgitated useful facts from every book that she had ever read. When she finally paused for breath, Delia touched her arm slightly and said calmly, "Have you had any experience in spell-building?"

Hermione stared at her. She had completely omitted the creation of Expecto Sacrificum. It was during that process that she had first learned about the existence and function of a Thinker. She mentally kicked herself for forgetting to mention her most important achievement.

"There was one."

"And why were you driven to create it?"

"To save Harry's life—to save all of our lives."

"And how did the idea begin?"

Hermione bit her lip, and remembered back to that night in seventh-year. It had been the first time things had felt normal since they had returned to school—normal enough, anyway. A fire had been going in the Gryffindor common room, even if there were hardly any Gryffindors left at school to appreciate it. So many students had been pulled out of Hogwarts that the quiet hardly seemed unusual anymore. And as the night had darkened outside the window, Harry, Ron and Hermione sat in armchairs, working through stacks of homework. It had been enough work to distract them from other, more difficult problems.

It had been Ron who had given her the idea. She flushed slightly, even now, remembering the conversation. Ron had only been joking when he said it...

"Ron, would you throw me that book?" Hermione had been scribbling furiously in her notebook, and hadn't looked up. "*The one with the blue cover?*"

Ron had picked up the book and looked at Harry, grinning. "*Throw this? You sure? I think it weighs about ten pounds, but all right, here we are—heads up!*"

Hermione had snapped her head up from her books, terrified that he was really about to throw it; she'd thrown out her arms to block her face. But he had only wagged the book at her, teasingly.

Harry had laughed at the two of them. "*Here,*" he'd said, "*pass it over.*"

Hermione had grimaced when the book had finally made it into her hands. "*Wrong one—throw me the other blue one—no, don't really throw it, Ron,*" she'd said hastily, as a terrorizing kind of expression had passed over Ron's face. "*Pass it nicely.*"

Ron had picked up the second book, looked at the cover, and stopped.

He'd looked up over its edge at Hermione, but hadn't passed it to her. "*Hold on!*" he'd said, his voice too delighted for anything having to do with schoolwork. Harry had looked at him keenly.

"*What is it?*"

"*Hermione, what've you got this for?*"

Hermione had quickly become very wary. "*What? Why? Isn't that Advanced Enchantments, Volume Three?*"

Ron had grinned sadistically. "*Not quite. More like Advanced Love Spells and Other Emotional Magic.*"

Harry had whooped, and Hermione had wanted to jump to her feet and grab the book back, but had controlled herself with all her strength. *Advanced Love Spells* had been on the Suggested Further Reading list for N.E.W.T. preparation, and she had been actually quite curious to see how they'd all worked—still, her cheeks had grown red as she'd remembered thumbing through the pages the night before. Not that she had ever needed to perform any love spells, and she *hoped* she never would. In fact, as Ron had prepared to tease her, she'd felt sure that all she would want to do by the end of the evening would be to perform an *anti-love* charm.

"*It's all dog-eared,*" Ron had added, letting the book fall open naturally to a well-worn spot. "*Aha,*" he'd said, skimming his finger down the page. "*Interesting... And here's another one—look at this Harry— with highlights. And I'll bet...*" Ron had nonchalantly flipped the book to the back index. "*Yes, as always, the already-studied ones have stars.*"

Hermione had patently ignored him, continuing to scribble at her homework.

Ron, however, had not been through with his performance; he had continued reading through the index. *"Know quite a few of them, don't you?"* he said slyly. *"Lot of stars here. Lot of them are under the S heading. Well, well, well..."*

Finally, Hermione had been provoked to respond. *"I know a lot of charms for everything, Ron,"* she had said hotly. *"Perhaps it's because I've been studying for my N.E.W.T.s. I suggest that you try it."*

Ron had flipped the book back toward its center pages and let out a low whistle. *"If you're suggesting that I try this one here, well then I say that's one N.E.W.T. I wouldn't mind studying for."*

Harry had laughed out loud and pushed his chair backward, out of the line of fire.

"Ron! Put that down! Honestly!"

"And a bit extra keen on the kissing ones—look, Harry, she's underlined this one twice—"

"Ron. I mean it now, stop, we haven't got time. There are only a few things we've got time to concentrate on—"

"The N.E.W.T.s and Voldemort, yeah, I know," Ron had said, in his most aggravating voice. *"I see that's what you've been concentrating on. I guess this is extra-credit exam research? Or did you plan to put an end to Voldemort with this one—Absolutis Adoratis! Yeah, that's it, we'll just love him to death, that'll work."*

As soon as he'd said it, something had clicked in Hermione's head. She had stared, amazed, at Ron. Instead of arguing with him, she had suddenly jumped out of her chair, grabbed Ron's hands, and pulled him up out of his seat. The spell book had fallen to the floor and Ron tried to back away.

"What—I'm sorry—" he'd said, obviously worried.

"No, Ron, you idiot—Harry, did you hear what he just said?" Hermione had grinned broadly, and she'd begun to bob up and down on her toes the way she had used to do in class when they were younger and she'd known all the answers to the questions. *"Of course..."* she whispered to herself, *"... of course..."*

"Of course?" Harry had repeated blankly.

"Love him to death. Harry, that's it." Hermione caught her breath, barely, and continued to ramble. She had never felt so excited. *"Harry, your mum died to save you—and that's what protected you the first time around—and then remember, the second time, Voldemort couldn't touch you!"*

Harry had shaken his head. *"Yes, but it doesn't matter anymore, does it? That magic's been out of effect since he used my blood to come back to power. He's got that in him now, he can touch me all right."* Harry's eyes had narrowed and he had looked at Hermione suspiciously. She had been able to tell that he didn't want their peaceful evening interrupted with this.

"Listen to me, I'm not finished." Hermione had continued to grip Ron's hands tightly as she spoke, shaking them up and down for emphasis. *"He couldn't touch you because you had been loved too deeply—because you had a sacrifice on you—Voldemort doesn't understand love, remember? Dumbledore told you that."*

Harry had nodded, looking slightly sick.

"Maybe Voldemort isn't stopped anymore by what your mum did, Harry, but what if... what if..." She'd been bouncing too excitedly to continue.

By that time, Ron had caught on. His mouth had dropped open and he'd stared from Hermione to Harry. *"This is it,"* he'd breathed, pulling his hands from Hermione's and beginning to pace around the common room. *"This is really it—it's love and—and it's loyalty, too, it's that sacrifice, it's like—yes! Remember how that sword came to you in second year, Harry? Loyalty. That's powerful magic."*

Hermione had nodded vigorously. *"We could do it, Harry."*

"Yeah, we'd get in the way of a curse for you—what if we could do it—maybe it would put a stop to—"

"NO!" Harry's face had gone sheet-white. Hermione and Ron had stopped their brainstorm to stare at him. He had continued in a low, hissing whisper. *"If you think for one second that I'm going to let you get in the way of a curse for me, then you can think again. That's not going to happen."* He had looked as though he'd been ready to storm out of the room.

Hermione had opened her mouth to speak, but Ron had laid a hand on her arm, and had stepped forward, facing Harry evenly.

"Harry, calm down. We're not saying we want to die. We're just saying it's the only kind of force that Voldemort might actually be hurt by."

Hermione had nodded. *"I just meant,"* she said gently, stepping up next to Ron, *"that if we could—I don't know—harness the force behind those feelings, then we might have a spell that we could really work with."*

Harry had shaken his head roughly. *"I don't know what you mean."*

"I mean like... the way other emotions are harnessed in magic. Like... a boggart! Laughter kills a boggart, Harry, it's partly the spell, but it's the laughter, too, the laughter that goes with it." Hermione had shrugged. *"Professor McGonagall always says that there's a force behind magic, if we care to understand it. It's like that Patronus you're so good at—you couldn't do it if you didn't have those feelings, that concentration—if you didn't have a real protector."*

Harry had paused and looked ready to listen.

Ron had looked at Hermione. *"A Patronus is what-joy, right?"*

"Yes, it's a manifestation of untouchable joy, it drives Dementors back because it can't be affected by depression or darkness."

"Right." Ron had the look that Hermione had seen so often on his face when they'd played chess. *"And do you think—I mean, is it possible to make a Patronus out of something else? Could there be something like that, only—Hermione, what am I trying to say here?"*

"Only instead of a projection of joy, it would be a projection of love and loyalty... oh, Harry..."

Harry had looked at her intently. He had looked as though he hadn't wanted to be a part of anything that had to do with his best friends getting in front of killing curses, but he had also looked as though he was considering her suggestion.

"Can we build a spell like that?" he had asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

"I think so. I think so. But..." She had looked from Ron to Harry and smiled. She hadn't smiled quite like that in a long time. *"I'll be right back,"* she'd whispered brightly, then turned on her heel, and fled to the portrait hole.

By the time Hermione finished her story, it was completely dark outside. She was sitting very straight, and her hands were now clenched in her lap. Delia didn't speak and there was a strange, faraway look in her eyes. Nervous and slightly frightened, Hermione said quietly, "Will that experience be able to help me become a Thinker?"

Delia snapped out of her trance and looked down at Hermione softly. "Yes, of course, but you must realize that you have much to learn."

"Oh, I do!" exclaimed Hermione, breathlessly, "I'm so eager to learn, I really am!"

"And you shall. But Thinking involves more than just having the *idea* for the spell—it involves creating it and implementing it, and having it actually exist, available to someone or a group of people. Can you tell me a bit about how you constructed the spell? Because you are right—your friend Ron did have the initial thought, although it was very promising that you picked up on it and developed it. It sounds as though you and he work well together."

Hermione blushed at the reference to Ron, and then began to explain her research in the library, the spells she'd used as a basis for the Sacrifice Spell, and the Arithmancy involved.

"There were four corners to the spell—Friendship, Family, Mentorship, and Love. I researched it all, mostly with Ron's help. We both formed the friendship corner—we decided it was necessary to form a stronger base for the entire spell. Especially because of the way we...er, well, anyway..."

Delia's face was unreadable. "I am quite impressed," she said, "but it will take several months of training before you can reach a point where you can mentally force yourself to find ways of implementing new magic on a regular basis. We will begin your training tomorrow."

Delia directed Hermione back to the bedroom where she had changed clothes. She said good-night and turned to walk down the hall, but Hermione suddenly remembered that she had promised to write to Ron as soon as she arrived.

Biting her lip, she cleared her throat and said, "Excuse me—Miss... Delia?" She felt awkward trying to ask the next question, but before she could say anything, Delia said, without turning back, "I'll send my owl Maricela to you in a few minutes. You may use her to deliver any letters that are necessary."

Hermione tried to remember if she'd read anything about the Thinkers having the ability to read minds, and then sat down at the desk by the window, pulling her bag of quills and parchment with her. Hesitating for a moment to collect her thoughts, she closed her eyes and allowed the warm island breeze to caress her face. For a moment, it felt as though Ron were there with her, and with a little sigh, Hermione decided that she would be nothing but honest. She would tell him exactly what she was thinking.

The wind on the small piece of land that served as the headquarters for the Permanent Azkaban Patrol was strong, even for early September. Bill could hear it whistling outside, and grunted in annoyance when his brother Charlie opened the door, and a huge blast of air entering behind him.

"Watch what you're doing, will you?" he asked irritably, reaching forward to keep his parchment from flying off of the desk. "Next time, Apparate or something."

"Who do you think I am?" asked Charlie, removing the Omnioculars from around his neck and placing them on the rack. "Percy? Normal wizards don't bother to Apparate when point A and point B are five feet apart from each other."

They'd been joking quite a bit about Percy over the last few weeks. Somehow, it made his absence less painful. Bill laughed. "You're just afraid," he accused Charlie, pointing a quill at him, "ever since you failed your first test...."

Charlie didn't have a chance to respond, because just then, Mick opened the door and this time, Bill was unable to keep his papers from flying around the room.

"Oy!" he said, scrambling to retrieve his work, "you two are going to drive me mad."

Charlie and Mick had been working round the clock over the past several weeks, trying to prepare for the implementation of the Permanent Azkaban Patrol. It had been a daunting task, and Bill was still amazed that two men who seemed outwardly to be so reckless and disorganized had managed to pull it off.

First, they had established several outposts on the islands surrounding Azkaban. The largest bit of land served as a holding pen for the nine dragons. The eight Welsh Greens that had been selected for this mission did not mind being housed so closely together, and the one Norwegian Ridgeback had always been an unusual case, and was actually quite attached to people, even if his way of showing affection was to blow fire in the direction of your face.

Already, close to sixty witches and wizards had arrived and were working day and night to feed and care for the dragons. Many of them had been dragon riders during the war, and, although unwilling to take on the dragon riding at Azkaban, they had been eager for a chance to work with the creatures on land. The entire staff lived in a rather makeshift dormitory on an isolated rock on the other side of Azkaban. A team of house-elves had been employed to cook and maintain the living quarters. Since the Patronus team was still operating day and night until the dragon riding schedule was in place, things were getting a bit crowded.

"What are you working on, anyway?" asked Charlie, moving to get a closer look at what Bill was writing. "Why are you inside, dry and warm, while we're out there"—he jerked his thumb in the general direction of the door—"risking our *lives*."

"Full of it today, aren't you?" Bill asked, dipping his quill in the ink and not looking up. "I'm drafting a Ministry Summons to the professional Enchanter from Charismatics Spellcraft International so that he'll come out to Azkaban before going on to Gringotts. Dad asked me to do it. He's supposed to start in a few days, and we need him here first, don't we? The Charismatics contact said that the charmer they're sending had some experience in masking magical creatures."

A crackling noise in the fireplace caused all three of them to turn their heads. A moment later, Rose K. Brown's deceptively sweet face appeared.

Charlie backed away, as though he were at school and had forgotten to turn in a homework assignment; while Mick boldly approached and shot her what he probably thought was a winning smile.

"How may we help you today, Ms. Secretary Privy?" he asked. Bill thought that she stared at Mick for a bit longer than necessary, but she didn't smile in return as she answered.

"Today was the deadline. Have you got all the riders or not?"

Mick checked his watch. "It's only three in the afternoon," he said. "We've got until midnight, haven't we?"

Rose sighed so heavily that the flames visibly flickered away from her. "The PAP cannot go into effect without the riders."

Charlie held up a hand. "We've got seven. I've heard back from someone this morning. He'll be arriving in a few days—I'm surprised he agreed, he's got a wife and young baby at home—but he says he wants to do it. He's not British—we'll have to ask Dad to sign a waiver to allow him to work on the project, but I don't expect it to be much of a problem."

"Who is it?" asked Bill curiously. "Is it one of the Quidditch players?"

"It is, and you'll never guess who it is." Charlie looked delighted with himself and raised his eyebrows at Bill.

"You're right, I won't, so why don't you just tell me."

Rose appeared to be looking down at something. She refused to take Charlie's bait. "Yes, Charlie,

please do tell us so that I can let your father know. I've got a meeting with him here at the Ministry in half an hour."

"It's Viktor Krum," Charlie said, looking excited. "Viktor bugging Krum! Can you believe it? I mean, we saw him play at the Quidditch World Cup, remember? I saw him fight a dragon at the Triwizard Tournament. And now he's coming here—"

"Krum," said Rose, appearing to be writing something down, although they could still only see her head. "How do you spell that? C-r-u-m-b?"

Mick rolled his eyes.

"K-r-u-m," said Charlie, through gritted teeth.

"Oh, yes, that's right," said Rose dismissively. "Let me know as soon as you hear from anyone else. I'll give this information to Arthur in a moment. Is everything else under control?" Her eyes narrowed as she looked at Charlie. He groaned.

"Yes, ma'am. Everything is quite under control, but if you'd like to come out here this evening and change our na..." He stopped when Mick punched him in the arm.

"Everything's okay, Rose," Mick answered her in an uncharacteristically gentle tone.

Bill thought he saw a ghost of a smile cross Rose's face, but she merely said, "Right," in a very business-like tone, and with a *pop*, she disappeared from the fireplace.

Mick blinked and turned to Charlie, who looked as though he very much wanted to say something, but before he could, the door opened yet again. Sirius entered, shaking his wet hair out in a motion reminiscent of his Animagus alter-ego. This time, Bill had firm hold of his parchment.

Sirius looked drained, but his eyes burned with intensity. He'd come to Azkaban that morning on the pretense of looking over the setup for the Permanent Azkaban Patrol. Instead, he'd spent the day out on Charlie's broomstick, circling Azkaban and watching the Dementors very, very closely. When Bill had gone out to check on him around noon, he'd been hovering in the air above the prison, just watching. It was almost as if he were trying to will them to disappear. Bill was relieved that Sirius had returned on his own, because he hadn't been looking forward to the thought of flying out there and forcing Sirius to come back to Headquarters.

"How does everything look, Mr. Black?" asked Charlie, with a note of seriousness in his voice. Though many people were still frightened by Sirius Black, many others were full of awe and respect for him and what he'd done and what he'd been through. Along with Arthur Weasley, Sirius Black had led the Order of the Phoenix towards victory, and although some people chose not to acknowledge Black's involvement, others were appropriately grateful.

Sirius nodded. "Looks like it'll work," he said gruffly. "Those ... creatures ... well, hopefully we won't *have* to use the dragons for very long. There must be a way to destroy them entirely."

"We'll find a way, Sirius," said Bill gently. "D'you mind looking over this directive before I send it? I want to make sure that it looks official." He handed his parchment to Sirius, in hopes that it would give him something else to think about.

"Well," said Mick, stretching, "it was nice to be here inside in the warmth, but I'm afraid I should head back out there again. Coming, Charlie?"

Charlie reached for his cloak and his Omniculars in answer, and Mick opened the door to leave. He was nearly blinded by two owls, both of who raced into the building, as if they'd been waiting at the door, too shy to knock at the window.

"That's Hedwig!" said Sirius, placing Bill's letter back down on the table and reaching out to the snowy owl, which hooted happily and flew towards Sirius's outstretched arm. He untied the letter from her leg, but before he could even look at it his attention was drawn, as was everyone else's, to the second owl.

"Looks like it's for you, Charlie," said Bill with a smirk. The tawny owl in question was a regular postal owl, and it was carrying an enormous red envelope that had all of the markings of a Howler. And sure enough, try as he might to back away, the owl kept following him, and wouldn't deliver the letter to anyone else in the room. "What's wrong?" Bill asked. "Did you do something to upset your *assistant*?"

"No!" said Charlie, reaching with a shaking hand toward the letter. Bill really couldn't blame him. They'd all, except for Percy and Ginny, managed to do something in their lives that had left them on the receiving end of a Howler from their mum. Charlie looked at Bill wild-eyed. "What could I have done to upset Mum?"

Bill shrugged, trying to look sympathetic. Even Charlie's fire-breathing dragon tattoo couldn't save him from the pain of a Howler. Placing his hands over his ears, Bill said calmly, "Go on then, be a man and open it. It'll be worse if you don't."

Nodding, Charlie grabbed the bright red envelope quickly from the owl, and slit it open with

trembling hands. A loud, piercing shriek filled the room. Bill stuffed his fingers more securely in his ears and Mick threw his cloak over his head. Sirius was watching unprotected, yet somewhat amused, and Charlie looked resigned to his fate, whatever it might be.

"...HOW COULD YOU CHARLIE, WHEN YOU KNEW HE'D SAY YES. HARRY HAS BEEN THROUGH ENOUGH ALREADY. HOW COULD YOU ASK HIM TO COME AND FLY ON YOUR DAMN STUPID DRAGONS AND FACE DEMENTORS. YOU GREAT BIG PRAT..."

Bill's mouth fell open. Was that...? Could it possibly be...? "Ginny?" he shouted. Charlie just nodded mutely. Sirius had gone even more pale than usual, and was staring at the letter in his hand. He still hadn't opened it, but Bill could now guess what it said.

"...DID YOU EVEN KNOW THAT HE WAS OFFERED THE POSITION OF SEEKER ON THE CHUDLEY CANNONS? HE TURNED IT DOWN BECAUSE HE THINKS HE CAN'T SAY NO TO ALL OF YOU! DID YOU EVEN BOTHER TO THINK BEFORE SENDING THAT LETTER? WAIT, WHO AM I TALKING TO? OF COURSE YOU DIDN'T THINK, YOU BIG DRAGON-LOVING IDIOT. I AM DISGUSTED. DISGUSTED. I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY. NOTHING HAD BETTER HAPPEN TO HIM, OR ELSE... NO, YOU KNOW WHAT? NOTHING WILL HAPPEN TO HIM, BECAUSE I'M COMING OUT THERE AS WELL. IF HARRY IS RIDING THE DRAGONS, THEN I'M GOING TO BE OUT THERE WATCHING. AND I'M GOING TO MAKE YOUR LIFE HELL CHARLES BEAUREGARD WEASLEY. YOU'VE DEALT WITH DRAGONS, BUT YOU HAVEN'T DEALT WITH ME."

With that, the envelope transformed into a dragon, which promptly blew fire and burned itself up. The ashes drifted innocently to the floor.

Charlie looked too shocked to speak. Bill unplugged his ears. "Might as well have been from Mum," he said, quite impressed. "Wonder where she gets it from?"

"Beauregard?" asked Mick, with a snort.

"It was our grandfather's name," Charlie answered testily.

Sirius held out the letter that Hedwig had delivered. When Charlie didn't notice, Sirius walked over and placed it in his hand. "I guess we know what this is about now, don't we?" he said gloomily.

"Sirius," Charlie said hoarsely, cowering a bit under the grim stare that Sirius was directing at him, "I told him not to do it. I *had* to send the letter. Rose made me send them to everyone. But I told Harry not to do it."

"Yeah, well, since when has he ever listened to anyone?"

"Dunno," shrugged Charlie, opening the letter, reading it, and then stuffing it in his pocket. "I guess we know that Ginny's still got a crush on Harry Potter though, don't we?"

"Yeah," replied Mick, "you Weasleys make a decision and stick to it, don't you. Fiercely loyal..."

"Well, there's no *way* that she's coming out here to do anything," said Bill, feeling protective, yet somewhat impressed with Ginny's threats. "No way Mum and Dad will let her. She still has to finish school."

"Why not let her come?" asked Mick innocently. "If Charlie's bringing his girlfriend, why can't Harry bring his?"

Bill wished for a moment that the Howler was still in the room—he could have compared its color to Charlie's face. "Shut up," he hissed at Mick. "She is *not* my girlfriend."

"Who's not your girlfriend?" Bill asked, trying to sound uninterested.

"Am I the only adult in the room?" growled Sirius. "Charlie, I'm not happy about this either. But I know it wasn't your fault, and quite frankly, Harry probably would have found his way out here without an invitation. Stupid, noble behavior is apparently a genetic trait. I've got to get back to Culparrat before I head home this evening, so if you'll all excu—"

There was another rap at the door. They all sighed loudly.

"What *now*?" groaned Charlie. "That'd better be our ninth rider."

Bill, being the oldest in a family of seven children, recognized the type of purple Express owl immediately. The letter it carried was equally as purple and as fluffy. This time, the owl headed for Bill; Charlie looked relieved. A moment later, their mother's voice exploded into the air, but it wasn't angry—rather, it was quite frantic.

"...Penny's having the baby! It's coming now! Hurry home, all of you! Hurry!!!"

The message repeated three more times, and then the envelope exploded into a fanfare of blue and pink ribbons. Charlie's face had instantly grown a deathly white, and Bill could feel his own head growing light.

"The baby..." he said slowly, looking around the room. "Percy's baby..."

"Go," said Mick, shoving both of them towards the fireplace. "Use the Floo, it's connected to the Burrow and I don't think either one of you is in much of a state to Apparate right now. I'll hold down the fort."

For once, Bill didn't think to make fun of him.

Charms, and Other Subjects

Ginny woke early on her first day of lessons, wondering how on earth she was supposed to concentrate on school. It was so strange: she had done everything in her power to get out of spending a year at the Burrow, and she'd been looking forward to her lessons with Remus since he'd first offered to teach her, but today, the only place she wanted to be was home. She rolled over quickly and fumbled on her bedside table for the little Muggle photograph that she had taken the day before with Hermione's instant camera. She hadn't asked to use it, but there had been no time to owl Hermione for permission—and anyway, it had been a real emergency. Ginny grinned at the wrinkled, sleepy little face that sat still in the funny-looking photo, and began making little cooing noises. Percival Leander Weasley was the most gorgeous baby in the world, and a very proud Aunt Ginny studied his tiny features for a long time. She wondered if Remus would mind putting off classes for another day or two. She wanted to go back to Ottery-St. Catchpole and hold the baby again, he'd been so warm and soft and funny, and the whole family had been in a fit over him. Even Penelope had smiled and laughed, and it was the first time that Ginny had heard laughter from her sister-in-law since before the memorial service. Yesterday, it had almost seemed that Percy was just in the next room, so often had his name been mentioned.

Ginny got out of bed and dressed quickly, trying as she always did to shake off thoughts of Percy before they could overwhelm her. She tucked the photograph of Little Percy into the pocket of her old black work robes, tied her hair into a neat tail, and for the first time felt a bit anxious about her lessons. Although it was true that Remus had been informally instructing her most of the summer, he had insisted upon treating the official tutorials as though they were both back at Hogwarts. Ginny gathered her books and looked wistfully around the room, her eyes sweeping over the bed once occupied by Hermione, and wondered what it would have been like if Hogwarts were open this year. Although, after all that had happened, she wasn't sure if she could have handled a return to school. This was better than Hogwarts, she reminded herself, because Harry, Ron and Hermione would all have graduated anyway, and she would have felt alone without them.

Downstairs, Ginny was very surprised to see Remus, Sirius, Ron, and even Harry sitting around the table, eating breakfast. They all paused and looked up at her when she entered, and they were all dressed—except for Ron, who was still in his pajamas. His eyes were only half open, although he did attempt to say “Good morning!”

“What's going on?” she asked suspiciously. Hands on her hips, she turned to Ron. “I thought you were staying over at home. Why are you awake?” He looked at her blankly, as though wondering the same thing himself, so she turned to Sirius instead. “Why aren't you at work already?” she demanded.

“There's gratitude for you,” laughed Sirius.

Ron ran one large hand through his hair, making his head resemble a flaming porcupine, and sighed dramatically. “I climb out of bed at the crack of dawn—”

“Quarter to nine in the morning is *not* the crack of dawn,” Ginny interrupted.

Ron continued; “- the *crack of dawn*, in order to make you feel loved on your first day of school, so you won't have to eat in the Great Hall all by yourself...”

“Oh,” said Ginny, flattered, and she finally slid into a chair at the table and set her book bag down. “All right then.” She picked up a piece of toast and began pulling the crusts off of it, then realized something. “Did you Apparate here like *that*?” she demanded, pointing to Ron's pajamas.

He looked down at himself. “What? I'm covered.”

Ginny huffed. “Ron! You could get splinched, and then you'd be half naked, stuck somewhere with everyone staring at you.”

Ron snorted. “You sound like Hermione,” he muttered, and then let out a small, involuntary

sigh, quite unlike the dramatic one he'd used earlier.

"She owled, didn't she?" Harry asked. "What'd she say? How's she doing?"

Ron's ears flushed slightly. "Yeah, she wrote," he said, looking uncomfortable. "She said... well, you know, it was mostly personal, but I could show you the part about..."

Harry swallowed a bite of cereal so quickly that he almost choked. "No, never mind," he said in a rush. "I'm sure she'll write to the rest of us."

Ginny watched as Sirius and Remus both hid their grins in their juice glasses. After a few minutes of everyone quietly munching away at their breakfasts, Remus pushed back his chair. "Now, if you all will excuse me," he said, "I have a few items to prepare before my pupil arrives." He shot Ginny a smile.

Sirius wiped his mouth and stood as well. "I'll come out with you, Moony," he said, grinning. "I've got to be off. Good luck at school, Ginny. Don't let the professors boss you, they're just a bunch of sad old codgers."

Ron and Harry sniggered, and Remus pursed his mouth at Sirius in a manner so like McGonagall's that Ginny had to laugh.

Ron left the table soon after, clearing the dishes away as he went, as if by habit. "That's a good barkeep," Harry harassed him, when he came back and ran a rag across the table with his wand. Ron flicked his wand sharply, making the rag fly up at Harry's face, but Harry caught it deftly before it could smack him, and sent it back into the kitchen. "Hey," he said suddenly, "are you still planning to look around later? Should we check the paper and all?"

Ron shrugged. "Probably."

"For what?" Ginny asked at once.

Ron ignored her question. "I'm going back to bed," he announced with a yawn, and left the room.

Ginny turned back to Harry, who was the only person that didn't seem to have anywhere to be. He watched Ron leave, then sat absentmindedly swirling his pumpkin juice around in the glass. "What's Ron looking for?" she asked him.

Harry shrugged. "A flat, I think."

"For him?"

"For both of us."

Ginny's heart sank, but she tried not to show it. "Sirius will miss you," she said lightly.

Harry set down his glass and looked keenly at her. He pushed up his glasses. "I wouldn't mind staying here," he said quietly. "But I think Ron wants to prove to your mum and dad that he can manage on his own. I think he wants to prove it to Hermione, as well."

Ginny felt a thrill course through her, as she did every time that she found herself having a real conversation with Harry. He was right about Ron, and she wasn't sure why, but his insight surprised her—possibly because he so rarely shared his insights. "Where's he going to look for a place?" she asked. "Far off, I imagine, if he's trying to prove something. London?" She hoped she sounded natural. The thought of Harry being out of reach—especially now that he was going to work at Azkaban—made her feel cold.

"No, I told him I want to stay close." Harry didn't take his eyes from hers. "I like it here, I don't want to live in the city."

"Here—you mean, you want to stay in Stagsden?"

"If we can find a place, then yeah. Stagsden."

"Good." The word was out before Ginny could help it. She blushed a little, but didn't want to be the first to look away, and Harry's gaze didn't falter. She found herself studying the color of his eyes behind the flash of his glasses.

"Nervous?" he asked, after a moment.

Ginny frowned, puzzled. "About?"

"School."

"Oh. Right." She grinned. "A little," she admitted. "I'm mostly afraid that Remus is going to regret offering to teach me." She laughed at herself.

Harry, however, looked serious. "You're going to know more than all of us soon. We didn't have an entirely proper education in our seventh year. I almost wish I could study again as well."

"So study with me," Ginny said rashly. "Write Charlie, tell him you take it all back, tell him you want to quit and go back to school. I'm sure Remus wouldn't mind another student, and you shouldn't be at Azkaban."

"Ginny..." Now Harry did look down at his plate. They hadn't discussed the dragon riding since she had announced her intention of joining him at Azkaban, if he went. There hadn't been time to talk; there had been Penny, and little Percy, and school to get ready for. It was time, Ginny realized,

to finish the conversation.

"Please don't do it."

He flinched slightly, and did not look back up at her. "Come on, it won't be that bad," he tried.

"Not that bad?" Ginny fought to keep her voice down; she could feel it trying to rise. "Harry, it's an evil place. And those... things... are evil."

"I know. That's why somebody has to keep them there."

"Why does it have to be *you*?"

Harry looked up and smiled thinly. "I don't know." Absently, he pushed his fringe back, revealing his scar, and Ginny thought briefly that the answer to her question was right there, on his forehead. "I asked Dumbledore that, once," he said, almost to himself. "Fifth year."

"What was his answer?" Ginny asked, very quietly, but Harry only shook his head.

"You should be getting ready for class, shouldn't you?"

Ginny glanced up at the clock—nearly nine. She picked up her book bag and held it in her lap. "I meant what I said about coming up there," she said.

"I know," Harry replied. "I heard you talking to your dad about it yesterday and he said there's no chance in hell he'll ever allow you."

Ginny felt color flood into her cheeks. He'd been listening to her. "So what?" she countered, standing up and throwing her bag over her shoulder. "I'll figure something out. Anyway, I'd like to see what it's all about, working with dragons."

Harry didn't answer. He just pointed to her pocket. "Something's falling out."

It was the little photograph of Leo. The twins had started calling the baby that almost as soon as he'd arrived. "It's *sort* of short for Leander," George had said, plucking him out of Fred's arms. "And he's our little lion, aren't you mate? Roar for Uncle George." "Practically guarantees him a spot in Gryffindor, too," Fred had teased, giving Penelope a peck on the cheek. "Wouldn't want him ending up in Ravenclaw with all the swotty prefects!" The whole family had taken to the nickname right away—it was easier than calling him "Percy", which would have been quite painful, and Penelope had seemed grateful to George for coming up with it.

Little Leo. Ginny looked at him, and everything else seemed to go away for a moment. His little eyes were scrunched in sleep and his tiny pink mouth was perfect. He even had the beginning wisps of fine red hair. "Just look," she said to Harry, holding out the picture with as much pride as she'd ever felt. "Isn't he lovely?"

Harry took the picture as carefully as if it were Leo himself and Ginny giggled in spite of her irritation with dragons and Azkaban and Harry's general stubbornness. "You can hold the picture normally, Harry, it's not the baby. You can even *drop* it, if you like," she teased, remembering how awkward he'd been with the tiny, breathing bundle.

"That's not funny—I really almost dropped him!"

"Oh, please. When have you ever dropped anything?" She held out her hand for the picture, and Harry turned it over. "I have to go to class," she said importantly. "See you at lunch."

"What's first?"

"Oh, I don't know. Potions?" Ginny shrugged. "I haven't got my schedule yet."

"You won't have any classes with Slytherin," Harry said, sounding jealous.

Ginny laughed at his tone. "True, but then again, I don't really get to be a Gryffindor."

Harry looked up at her. "Oh, go on. You're the entire Gryffindor seventh year class."

"And the prefect, and the Head Girl, and the Quidditch Team Captain."

"Not for long. You're late. Professor Lupin'll revoke all your titles and have you scrubbing the Owlery. Hedwig's cage could use it, I'm telling you."

Realizing that she was, in fact, late for her first class, Ginny hurried from the room, lightly swatting Harry's shoulder as she went. As if he'd anticipated this reaction, he reached for her hand as she touched him, and she felt his fingers pull slightly against hers. With the tingle of contact still running up her arm, Ginny disappeared into the study that was to be her castle for the rest of the year.

* * * * *

Remus stood behind the wide desk in his study, looking at the clock and smirking. Ginny was late. He remembered her at age twelve—always a very attentive student, always bright and alert and cooperative, but very nearly always the last straggler to come through the door—and apparently things had not changed. While he waited for her, he checked things over once more; he had the teacher's guide spellbooks, several extra rolls of parchment, and objects for demonstrations laid out before him. A chalkboard was now hanging on the wall at his back, next to a portrait of Remus's

great-grandfather, which shimmered as the old man's breathing fluttered his moustache. Near the window, Remus had hung a lunar chart, and his eyes flickered across its white crescents and orbs. It was a little over two weeks until the next full moon. Ginny would have to begin the potion again quite soon—he hoped that she would not come to regret her decision to give him so much assistance. It would eat up quite a lot of her life, until she got the hang of it. Snape had been able to do it in his sleep, but then, he'd been a genius.

The door banged open and Ginny stood in it, her face flushed as she fought not to smile. "Sorry!" she said breathlessly. "Harry wouldn't shut up!"

"Oh, that's right, blame me," Harry yelled from down the hall. Ginny grew a bit redder, and her smile got the better of her.

"We were talking about Leo," she apologized, holding up a snapshot of her new nephew. "I got overexcited. Really, I won't be late again." A smaller desk had been set up to face Remus's, and Ginny slid into the chair, letting her book bag clatter to the ground beside her. "Right," she said, tucking away the baby's picture, and pulling out parchment and ink. "What's first?"

Remus looked at her before answering, taking in her blush, her grin, the way her eyes kept darting towards the door, and the oddly askew appearance of her rather tidy ensemble. Her Hogwarts work robes bore a faded Gryffindor crest, and Remus's eyes lingered on it. She was the whole of Hogwarts, this year, and she was most certainly a Gryffindor.

"Without house points," he said, meeting her eyes, "I can't think of how to reprimand you for making me wait. But let's just say that there are plenty of detentions to do around this house, and I won't hesitate to dole them out if I have to." He smiled. "I know it's not exactly formal, with just the two of us, but we ought to respect each other's time as much as we can. We have a lot to get through. All right?"

Ginny nodded, looking less like she'd just come from flirting with Harry, and more like a properly abashed seventh year. Remus strained not to laugh. How odd it was to treat Ginny like a student, when she already knew more than he ever would about her most important talents. "Here," he said, holding out a scroll, "I've drawn up a schedule—have a look and see if it's agreeable. We can change it around as we go, but I thought it would be a good idea to keep with what you've been used to."

Ginny's eyes scanned the timetable, and she gave a squeal of delight. "Astronomy at midnight on Tuesdays!" she cried, looking up at Remus. "Thank you." Her eyes clouded briefly. "But it's... going to be so weird, without Emily. We were partners in that class. And Andrew always needed help with... but never mind." She shook herself and looked back down at her schedule.

Remus watched her, his heart heavy for her sake. He tried to imagine what it would have been like to have missed his seventh year at Hogwarts. Seventh year had come for them during terribly dark times, but all he remembered now were the joys he'd felt. After he had finally forgiven Sirius for having told Snape how to get underneath the Whomping Willow, the rest of that year had been amazing. James and Lily had become engaged. They, and Sirius, had begun their applications for the Department of Mysteries. Peter had started trying to get apprenticeships lower in the Ministry. Remus had been barred from all of that by his lycanthropy, but Sirius and James, and even Peter, had spent the whole year making that up to him with more excitement than it was legal to experience—the Marauders had caused more damage to the school in that year than in the other six combined. They'd had their best romps in the Forbidden Forest, James had played his best Quidditch, and though they *had* got the map confiscated, it hadn't been long after when they'd received news that had wiped their childish concerns away completely. Albus Dumbledore had approached them, and Lily, separately, and asked them to join a resistance movement that had led them to the Order of the Phoenix. Seventh year had changed their lives.

"Herbology," Ginny muttered, "Charms, Ancient Runes—oh, I never signed up for that on my own, do I have to?—Transfiguration, Arithmancy, History of Magic... well, you won't bore me to sleep, anyway... Care of Magical Creatures—oh, thanks for not putting Divination on here—and Defense Against the Dark Arts." She looked up. "Do I really need Defense class, at this point?" she asked quietly.

Remus nodded, and remembered what Alastor Moody had once told him. It had turned out to be all too true. "Evil doesn't leave, Ginny. It just gets weaker for awhile. In your lifetime, you may experience the defeat of another Dark—"

"Fine," she interrupted, and looked back down at her schedule. "Why does it say that Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at two o'clock are to be announced?"

"Because I'm about to announce a new class."

"New!" Ginny gaped at him. "But there are already a million classes here! What did you do, ask *Hermione* what the seventh year schedules are like? She takes extra classes for fun, you can't trust her."

Remus just smiled. "You might change your mind when I tell you what it is."

Ginny looked unconvinced, but curious. "Well then?" she prodded, when Remus did not continue.

He picked up a thick textbook and turned it over in his hands. "Ginny, have you ever heard of Empathic Magic?"

She frowned, as if trying to remember. "I... don't think so."

"All right. But you know what empathy is."

"Sure." She shrugged. "To feel what someone else is feeling, right? Or like, to identify with someone. Should I get a dictionary?"

"No, that's fine." He watched her carefully, feeling rather excited. It was wonderful, teaching- it gave him a kind of high to watch a face light up with sudden understanding, as he knew Ginny's was about to. "Do you remember the first day that you helped me in the garden this summer? We were planting the pumpkin seeds and you were able to tell automatically that the last three wouldn't grow. You told me they were dead, and I asked you how you knew."

"I didn't know," Ginny said. "I still don't. Is that Empathic Magic? I can tell if plants are dead?"

A small smile formed around Remus's mouth, and he looked at her warmly and shook his head. "That's a tiny fraction of what I believe you are able to do." He set the book on her desk, perched on the edge of his own, and continued. "I think you naturally sense plant auras. It's one of the many indicators of Empathic Magic."

Ginny stared down at the book: dark, frayed leather with the words *Empathy in Sorcery, A Complete History and Guide* stamped in gold on its cover. "Oh," she said. Her voice was quite small. "So... why don't we learn this at Hogwarts? Is it just not terribly important, or..."

"The reason that Empathic Magic isn't taught at Hogwarts is that there is no reason to train a person who does not carry the ability. It would be like training a Muggle in witchcraft—all the knowledge in the world can't make up for lack of natural power."

"Oh." Her voice was even smaller. "So... not everyone can sense plant auras."

"There's more to it than plants," began Remus, assuming his professorial voice and finding that it came effortlessly back to him. "You've heard of mental health mediwizards, of course. There are several at St. Mungo's—highly trained specialists who do all they can to help those whose minds and emotions have been addled. General mediwizards, as you know, concentrate on healing the physical body. Madam Pomfrey, for example, is an excellent nurse, and I imagine she can heal nearly everything."

"Not madness or death," Ginny said under her breath.

"No one can turn back death, and no one has been able to cure madness, that's true. But for everything else, there are intelligent witches and wizards in our medical community, trying to keep everyone sane and healthy. Yes?"

Ginny nodded and ran her fingers across the gold lettering of her book. "Yes."

"They must be trained. They work through potions and salves and charms and counseling. They work to find out where the invisible problems of the mind and body lie, and from the outsides of these problems, they work to remedy them. Still with me?"

"Mm-hmm. But Remus- and I don't mean to cut you off," Ginny said, taking her fingers from the book and looking apologetic. "But I should tell you that I don't think I'd make much of a mediwizard. I'm just not the type. I couldn't study that long, and it's not quite *me*, you know? Cutting people open, or regrowing bones, or whatever... no."

Remus held up a hand. "Let me finish. There are some things that medicine can't heal. Students of Empathic Magic do not become mediwizards—they become what are called Healers. They require no training of the sort you're worrying about—all of the ability is natural. It's in you, Ginny. You *are* a Healer, right now. I'm almost positive. Do you remember what we talked about that day in the garden? Before the seeds?"

"Erm..." Ginny screwed her eyes shut tightly for a moment, then jumped slightly in her seat, gripped the desk with her hands and opened her eyes. "We were talking about your... transformations," she said, almost inaudibly. "I'm dizzy."

"Why? What just happened?" Remus asked, crouching down in front of her.

"Nothing."

"Come on, Ginny. I saw you jump. What did you feel?"

She looked at him warily. "I don't know," she said. "I think it's just that I have to make the potion again soon."

"Why do you have to? Explain it to me again."

"Because..." she avoided his eyes. "You're in a lot of pain. Mostly it's in your mind, but it's

physical, too.”

“What happens if you don’t make the potion?”

“I feel sick.”

“Turn to page twenty-four and read aloud from the second paragraph.”

Looking glad to have something to concentrate on, Ginny flipped the book open and found her page. “Healers often discover their abilities by accident, always after having been through a traumatic experience, and usually after having spent a length of time in close proximity to a plant, animal or person who requires Empathic assistance. The novice Healer will find him or herself working steadily to prevent the plant, animal or person in question from feeling pain. Especially if the Healer’s subject is human, he or she is likely to become physically ill whenever not engaged in some form of healing process, makeshift as it may be. Novice Healers may find themselves suddenly capable of levels of magic that were previously far beyond their skills. If no one present recognizes the phenomenon, the novice Healer will often spend his or her entire life devoted to a person whose pain is so intense that it requires constant attention, unaware that this devotion is a product of Empathic Magic.”

Ginny stopped reading. She looked pale and drawn.

“Sound familiar?” Remus asked gently.

She nodded, but did not look up.

“Read just a little further, if you can.”

Ginny drew a shaking breath. “Healers are born, not made,” she read unsteadily, “but the study of Empathic Magic requires a level of maturity that is not usually found in anyone younger than thirty-five or forty, and most students do not realize their gifts before that time. There have been younger Healers, but they are the rarest of rare. The reason for this is simple: in order to awaken sufficiently to the vibrations of pain in those around them, Healers must have experienced a good deal of pain themselves—both physical and emotional. More often than not, a person born with the Empathic gift will live a relatively happy life, and never awaken to his or her ability to Heal. Traumatic experiences are necessary awakenings for those who are gifted with Empathic Magic. However, if a traumatic experience is strong enough, it will create a powerful chain reaction in the dormant Healer, allowing his or her gifts to rise to the surface. Painful experiences in early adolescence are the most successful in awakening Empathic gifts. The youngest Healer on record had the terrifying experience of being possessed—” Ginny broke off, sounding very close to tears.

“That’s enough.” Remus had been crouched in front of her desk all the time she had been reading; now he stood and went to his own seat. “That’s quite enough.” He waited through a long pause, organizing his own thoughts and papers, giving her a chance to speak first.

“So I’m a Healer.” It was no longer a question. “Whatever that means.”

“It means that you have the ability to sense or intuit a person’s ailment or condition, either physical or mental.”

“Great. So I can feel a lot of pain.”

“Yes,” Remus said, hoping he could make her see past that burden to appreciate what a gift her talent really was. “You can feel it—tangibly, in the air. Can’t you? And sometimes you might be able to see it—it might have colors, or shapes. It might feel like knots in the air that need untying.” He studied Ginny as he spoke; her face grew more and more bewildered as he put words to the things he knew she must have been very confused about for a long time. “You might be moved to touch someone, just to lay your hands on their head or heart. You might feel weights around people, or see dark places, and feel that you have the ability to create a kind of light.”

“How... do you know?” she finally said. “That’s exactly... Can you do it, too?”

“No. Everything I just said came from that book.”

Ginny glanced down at the book as if it were going to bite her, then looked away from its open pages and gazed out the window.

“After the experience in the garden, I started watching you more closely. I noticed that when people were feeling unhappy, or unsettled, that you often became pensive, sometimes even trance-like. It’s most evident—well. Can I be perfectly honest? I don’t mean to be too personal.”

Ginny gave a rather sarcastic laugh. “I think it’s too late for that.”

Remus met her eyes. “All right. What I’ve noticed is that your Empathy is most evident around Harry. It makes sense, you see. He’s been through quite a lot, you may feel naturally drawn to help him.”

It was a long time before Ginny spoke, and when she did, she changed the subject entirely. “I’ve never heard of a Healer,” she said flatly. “If it’s such a bizarre study, you’d think we’d at least be taught what they *are*. Mum or Dad would’ve mentioned something about it.”

"There hasn't been a Healer since before Grindelwald's defeat. There is usually one mature, trained Healer in the world at a time. There were two, in 1938, which was very interesting. But they were both casualties of Grindelwald's army, and we lost them."

"What happened to them?"

"They were abducted for their ability to Heal naturally, without a mediwizard's facilities or tools. Very useful in restoring Dark wizards to the ranks."

"Then why were they killed?"

Remus sighed. She certainly asked all the difficult questions right away. "It is believed," he admitted, "that they took their own lives, rather than contribute to Grindelwald's continued rise."

To his surprise, Ginny merely nodded. "Well, that makes sense." She looked at her book again, this time with the ghost of determination. "Am... I the only one?"

"I think so. I wish there were someone to train you who knew better than I do."

She waved him off. "Will I be able to help people like—people who were hurt in the war? People who've suffered?"

"You do it all the time, without realizing it. You do it with Harry. And look how you've helped me already—and with study and practice, your abilities will get stronger. You'll become able to control them, use them freely, experiment with what can be done."

"Hermione's parents?" Ginny demanded suddenly. "Will I be able to wake them?"

Remus's eyebrows shot up. He hadn't thought of that. "I... don't want to get your hopes up on that score. We've discussed the finality of death and madness. But short of those two extremes, I think you might experiment with all kinds of things that have never been done."

"Could I stop you being a werewolf?"

Remus had to work not to show his shock at the question, and yet, even as he knew that his condition was irrevocable, he pushed down an incredible desire. There would be no harm in letting her try... and perhaps when she was older, and had more experience... But that was all a long, long way in the future, and he had to accept that, even if she made such efforts, they would fail. There had been werewolves for thousands of years, and Healers for the same length of time. Some things simply *were*.

"I think it's probably fitting," he answered lightly, "to class lycanthropy with madness and death." He laughed a little. "Oh, don't frown like that, come on. I *can* joke about it, you know."

But Ginny didn't smile. "When I've studied, and I know what I'm doing, then what... I mean, will I just go about, helping people?" she asked. "Wander all over?"

"You want to know if you'll be gainfully employed?" Remus grinned at her. "Oh, you'll have more to do than you'll be able to handle. You'll join Sirius in the world of those who never sleep. From page sixty-four, I believe—The witch or wizard who is known to be Empathic is often sought after and admired to help find cures, counter-spells, and solutions to problems ranging from marital woes to the running of governments."

"Governments! I could help Dad."

"You could do a lot of things. To start with, however, you can read through page seventy tonight as your homework assignment. It's time to move on to our first lesson of the year, which is Charms."

"What?" Ginny sounded flabbergasted. "How can I study *Charms*, when I've got *this*?" She picked up the book and shook it. "I have questions!"

"Then the second part of your homework assignment will be to write out any questions that are not answered by your reading assignment. We will discuss all of it tomorrow at—" Remus looked down at the timetable. "Two o'clock, when you have your first lesson in that subject. Now, pull your wand. We'll spend the morning going over some sixth year Charms as a warm-up."

Ginny pulled her wand, but very slowly, her eyes skimming ravenously back and forth the pages of the book on her desk.

"Ginny. Put the book away."

With a plaintive sigh and a grudging *thunk!*, Ginny set the book on the floor and rolled up her sleeves. "Yes, Professor Lupin," she said, her tone mimicking what it had been in second year.

"You know, I've *missed* that title." Remus smiled serenely at his pupil. "I like it. From now on, in the classroom, I'm Professor Lupin to you."

Ginny rolled her eyes, and Remus laughed. The school year had finally begun.

* * * * *

Ron was very busy procrastinating when his sister and Remus entered the kitchen at lunchtime. He was now fully awake and dressed and had spent the late morning looking at his snapshot of Leo, thinking about Percy, and deciding that the Weasleys were universally good looking. After that, he'd

decided to clean his room and cook a stew rather than look for a flat, as he'd decided to do earlier. More than anything else, however, he was avoiding thoughts of his upcoming trial. He'd acted a lot braver than he really felt, when Hermione had still been in the room. But now she was gone to some rock in the middle of the sea, and he was feeling nauseated at the idea of defending himself in court.

"Here," he said, distracting himself by doling out servings of stew for Remus and Ginny. Remus thanked Ron, and then excused himself to go and eat in the "staff room" so that the students could "say all sorts of nasty things about the teacher behind his back." He took his stew upstairs.

Ginny, however, refused lunch. She sat down at the dining table with an enormous book, which she proceeded to open and read as if her life depended on it.

"Here," Ron tried again, offering Ginny's untouched bowl to Harry, who had wandered into the kitchen.

"Thanks," said Harry, and settled in the chair beside Ginny's. "What class is this for?" he asked her quietly, tapping the page with his finger.

"A new one," Ginny answered curtly, but Ron noticed that she took Harry's fingers and moved them off of the book with one hand in order to turn the page with the other, and that afterward, Harry didn't bother to move his hand out of hers. Their fingers remained touching, and Ron stared for just a second before getting a grip on himself. It was weird, seeing the two of them so comfortable, but it was all right. He'd get used to it... eventually.

"Another one *done*," came a victorious shout from the hallway. "Thomas Axion—guilty. His wife Celeste—innocent of the Unforgiveables, but she's going to be fined heavily and they've placed her accounts under observation until further notice." Sirius strode into the kitchen, his eyes unnaturally bright, his face looking very thin. Ron hadn't noticed it before, but the lines around his eyes were growing deeper, and he looked sallow and unhealthy. He also looked exhausted. "I'm hungry," Sirius said, sniffing the air. "What is that?"

"Stew." Ron handed him a bowl, which he took with barely a mutter of thanks before he dug in.

"You don't usually get home for lunch," Harry said, turning in his chair.

"Forgot my money pouch," Sirius mumbled through a mouthful of stew. "Would've stayed, but I was getting lightheaded. Hell of a trial. Outrageous."

At the mention of trial, Ron felt his stomach turn. He'd been hungry just a moment ago, but now he felt he might be sick if he tried to eat. He put the lid on the stew pot and sat down with the rest of them. "Oh yeah?" he said, trying to sound nonchalant. "Why? What was it like?"

"Axion didn't have a chance. Evidence was stacked against him—real evidence, too, none of this 'Oh, I was working under the Imperius' loophole crap. No—this waste of life had tried to set a family's house on fire—Muggle parents, wizard children—and he tried to start the fire in the Muggle way. Figured he could never get indicted for it if it didn't involve magic. He filled two milk cartons with papers and kerosene. Must've thought it would be a perfect firestarter. And it might've been—trouble was, the Muggles had rigged some kind of system in case of an emergency—"

"A fire alarm," Harry put in.

"Right. So they got down there, put the fire out, the kids were smart enough to be suspicious that it was Death Eater activity, and they turned in the milk cartons as evidence." Sirius grinned. "They were full of papers, like I said, along with gasoline-soaked photographs. You'll never believe who the photos were *of*."

Ron shook his head. "You can't mean they were of himself," he said.

"Thomas Axion the third, in full and moving color. A lovely one of him and his wife. Several of him getting different sorts of awards. One of him in trunks."

"But that's—that's just ludicrous!"

"So's setting someone's house on fire," said Ginny sagely, still not looking up from her book.

"True." Sirius finished his stew with a decided slurp, and stood.

"Leaving?" Harry asked quickly, and Ron glanced at him. He hadn't thought about it much, but the whole point of moving in with Sirius for the summer was so that Harry could spend a bit of time with his godfather. That hadn't really happened, what with all the trials. It was sad, really.

"Have to," Sirius said. "Another one this afternoon, and it's got the better of me, I'm telling you. I know the woman's guilty. I *know* it. But I can't prove it. I swear I'd use illegal means to prove it if I didn't know what it was like to be in her shoes. Just in case. I keep telling myself, just in case, I have to be fair." He sounded almost manic. "If I were anybody else, I'd've had her Stunned and thrown straight back in Culparrat," he muttered. "The Council are ready to throw her back in, they all think I'm crazy." He rubbed his temples. "Can't trust anybody else to do this. And then I've got that money grubbing Malfoy Advocate shooting me looks when he passes me in the street—"

"What, they're getting ready to prosecute me?" Ron demanded. "You've talked to their Advocate?"

"No, I've just seen him. But I know his type—classic Death Eater sycophant." Sirius looked disgusted. "You've got nothing to worry about, Ron. Between the witnesses we have, and Colin's photographs from the hospital, we've got more on them than they do on you."

Ron tried to look convinced. "Sure," he said. "So I'll just sit tight till next week, then." He knew he sounded terrified, but he couldn't help it.

Sirius gave a short laugh. "Look, if you're nervous, I'll tell you what. Come up to London with me and sit in on tomorrow's trial. See what a real criminal has to go through. I guarantee, once you hear the charges against some of these people, you won't have a care in the world."

"I... wouldn't want to interrupt or anything," Ron began, but he had to admit he rather liked the idea. He'd get to see the inside of a courtroom; he'd get to know what trial proceedings were like. He wouldn't be so uninformed, when he went up against Malfoy.

"It wouldn't be an interruption. You'd sit behind Council, and observe." Sirius pulled his wand. "Invitation's open. I'll be leaving at seven, tomorrow morning, and you can come then, if you want. See you all tonight." He Disapparated.

"Well," Harry said after a moment. He was looking, rather tensely, at the place where Sirius had just been.

Ginny looked up from her book again. "You all right?" she asked. Her fingers were still on his, and it looked to Ron like she had tightened them.

"He hasn't said a word to me about Azkaban." Harry smiled grimly. "Not one word. Don't you think that's strange?"

Ron was about to answer when he realized that Harry wasn't really talking to him. He was talking to Ginny, who was answering quietly—now moving her fingers a little bit on Harry's hand.

Not wanting to watch them have some sort of *talk*, Ron escaped the room at top speed, still thinking about London. He had to work late tonight, so getting up at seven in the morning was going to hurt. But it would hurt a lot less than getting pounded in court, and anyway, it would be gratifying to see Sirius putting a couple of Death Eaters away for life. Ron had a sudden mental image of Sirius, marching up to criminals and frightening all of them into immediate confessions. It would be great to sit back and watch him go.

Feeling much better about things, Ron realized that he was suddenly hungry again, but he had no desire to go back into the dining room and find out what Ginny and Harry were doing. Deciding to grab a snack in the village, Ron headed out of the house and down the road. He pulled a wad of paper from his back pocket and unfolded it to read while he walked.

"Dear Ron,"

read the familiar, tidy cursive,

"I haven't had to write you a letter in almost two years. It's funny, but although I hate being away from you, I love writing you letters. It's nice to be able to say whatever I like, too, and this is the first time I've ever felt that I could. The last time we were apart for a summer, I was just fifteen, and I didn't feel quite comfortable telling you everything. I used to choose every word very, very carefully."

Ron grinned, though he'd already read Hermione's letter a hundred times. She was so damn cute.

"I was so scared you'd laugh at something I said! Of course now I realize that no matter how sensible I am, you're going to laugh at whatever I say, so it's no use laboring over every line."

I love you. I miss you. I'm glad we were able to spend the night together, because it helps to have that time to think about. (All right, I'll be honest—I feel funny writing that, but I don't think it's because I'm embarrassed, really. I think it's more that I'm terrified that Harry or Ginny—or Remus or Sirius!—will walk by and pick this up and see it. So either you keep it very safe, or you have to burn it up.)

Cortona is so beautiful that it doesn't seem real. Neither does Delia—she's the Thinker. She's so... wise. Or she seems wise. You know the way Dumbledore just made you feel that he knew? Delia has that quality. She had me tell her all about how we built Exspecto Sacrificum, and she hasn't kicked me out yet, so I guess.... I guess I'm staying. I'll write more about the island and the robes she gave me (they are sleeveless. I like them.)"

Ron had a feeling that he would, too. Imagining Hermione in sleeveless robes, he continued reading.

"But I'm going to write all of the newsy things later on, in a letter for the whole house. This one is just for you and I'm very tired, and not really in the mood to put down a lot of details like, 'And then I had tomatoes and olives.'

I know that you'll beat Malfoy. I know that between you and Sirius, there's nothing anyone can do to get at you. And if you need me to come back for any reason, you just tell me, and I'll be there.

I love you,

Hermione

p.s.—Please tell Crookshanks that I miss him, too."

Ron read letter over and over until he felt it had burned right into his eyes. He wished he had a quill with him. He wanted to write her back, right now, and tell her that he loved her too—tell her that he was an uncle. She was going to have an attack when she got the snapshot of Leo; Ginny had taken an extra one just for her, in which the baby appeared to be sticking out his tongue at the camera. Perfect for Hermione. Ron grinned and shoved her letter back in his pocket, trying to imagine up a good reply. He was so busy imagining his letter, and her expression upon receiving it, that he forgot to look where he was going, and very nearly ran down an elderly wizard.

"Whoa there, young man!" croaked Mr. Archibald. He was a slight old man, who cut quite a figure in brown wizard robes and a tweed cap. He tottered from the collision.

"Sorry," said Ron quickly, reaching out to steady him. "My fault." He liked Mr. Archibald. The little gentleman showed up at the Snout's Fair once or twice a week, and always ordered one sipping whiskey, which he'd sip for three hours before heading home.

"It's all right," said Mr. Archibald, leaning against Ron with one hand as he straightened as best he could. Then he smiled. "Perhaps you can help me, Mr. Weasley—I've got to put this sign up, but I've gone and left my wand inside. Got yours?"

"Sure," answered Ron, pulling his wand out of his pocket. "Are you starting a business or something?"

"No, no," Mr. Archibald was now surveying his house with an air of authority, hands on his hips. "Just trying to rent out my place. My granddaughter's insisting that I go and live with her family in Hogsmeade. Says I can't be trusted to remember my wand any longer. Guess she's right, eh?" He chuckled at himself and nudged Ron's arm with his elbow.

"Yeah, right," said Ron slowly, looking at Mr. Archibald with a mixture of amazement and disbelief, and then towards his cottage, which was looking a bit rundown, but certainly inhabitable. It had a comfortable looking front porch, and a somewhat overgrown garden. One of the outer walls was as turquoise as his father's old Ford Anglia. The other walls were a dull brown, but the paint was peeling a bit in places, revealing that shocking turquoise had once been the color of the whole house. It was eccentric, but it was nothing that a bit of magic couldn't fix. "Say—how much rent are you asking for this place, anyway?"

"Fifty Galleons a month is enough to keep me stocked with Ogden's Old Firewhiskey, peppermint imps, and *Wizards Digest* I should think," Mr. Archibald answered cheerfully. "Why? Know anyone who'd be interested?"

"Yeah," Ron answered with a smile. "Me."

"Really? But don't you just live down the street? Ahh....." A look of comprehension flickered across the old man's face and he leaned in close to Ron, winked, and whispered, even though the street was deserted. "You want a place to entertain the ladies. I remember those days...." and Mr. Archibald stared off into the distance, his eyes slightly weepy, as he remembered something that Ron figured he'd probably rather not know more about.

"Er, yeah," answered Ron, deciding just to agree with Mr. Archibald for the moment.

"So, when will the place be available?"

"Well," answered Mr. Archibald, scratching his nose and attempting to look authoritative. "I'd prefer to be in Hogsmeade next week, it's my great-granddaughter's birthday. I've got twelve great-grandchildren, you know." Mr. Archibald looked at Ron as if daring him to top that one.

Ron grinned widely. "That's wonderful," he answered, trying to remain calm and nonchalant during this important business transaction. "I've just got one nephew—he was born yesterday, as a matter of fact."

"Then congratulations are in order!" cried Mr. Archibald. "Yes, yes! Once an uncle, you'll get the itch to have one of your own, I remember it well. Definitely going to need a place to bring the ladies." He looked contentedly from Ron, to the little house behind him. "It'll be good for this old house to see some young life."

"So then, it's all right if I rent it?" Ron asked, ignoring the comments about fatherhood as best

he could. His ears felt remarkably hot.

"Quite all right. No reference necessary—I know you're working steadily at Goldie's. Will there be a—oh, what do you young people call them now—will you have a flatmate?"

"Just my friend Harry. You know him."

Mr. Archibald started visibly, and gave Ron a knowing look, but seemed determined not to make a fuss about fame—though Ron imagined that, once in Hogsmeade, he'd be spinning tales to all twelve of his great-grandchildren about how Harry Potter now lived in his old house.

"I'll bring a deposit by this evening on my way to work, then, shall I?" Ron suggested in the most businesslike manner he could muster.

"Certainly," answered Mr. Archibald, with a matching air of formality, reaching out to shake Ron's hand. "I shall expect you."

"Great." Ron shook his hand and had jogged partway back up the road toward Lupin Lodge when he remembered something. "Mr Archibald," he called back, "does your cottage have a name?"

"The Notch," Mr. Archibald called back.

Ron jogged the rest of the way home—but it wasn't going to be home for long. In a week, home would be the Notch. He grinned to himself. Great name. Weird color, but it had character—and it was barely a quarter of a mile down on the same street. Harry could stay near Sirius. He could stay near Hermione.

He burst through the door of Remus's house and jogged into the kitchen, forgetting that Harry and Ginny had been in there, talking—they were there, still, and the talk looked quite private, but whatever it was, it could wait. "Harry," Ron interrupted happily, ignoring Harry's reluctant glance and Ginny's despairing look, "do you want to see our new flat, or what?"

* * * * *

"Bill,

Tried to come in and find you, but these damn goblins are ridiculous. As if they don't know who I am. They act like they don't even know who YOU are! Anyhow, I just wanted to introduce you to the person they sent over from Charismatics, because the P.A.P.'s Diversion Enchantments are up and running, and they're amazing—honestly, Mick just flew out there on Viking—that's the biggest dragon we've got—and we're entirely safe, from two miles into the shoreline to two miles out past Azkaban. These spells are exactly like the ones your old girlfriend used during the war, seriously. Go introduce yourself—the charms at Gringotts will be restored in no time.

Got to go,

Goblins trying to strip-search me,

Charlie"

Bill threw the note into the top drawer of his desk along with his identification badge, which he was tired of feeling around his neck, and looked around his office. It was unusually tidy, and had been ever since he'd taken the job in London. In Egypt he'd come and gone, securing treasure and busting curses all over creation, and there had never been time for cleaning up offices. But here, he only worked in the lower vaults of the bank itself. He was often at his desk, therefore, and had taken to keeping it clean.

He had to admit he was bored. London was great, England was home, and it was good—if trying—to be with Charlie. Best of all, he felt like a real help to his father. But, Bill admitted to himself, picking up a polished stone model of a pyramid and standing it up in his palm, he wouldn't have minded facing down a Sphinx, or a Sand Wraith, or blasting apart a particularly difficult curse shield. The Death Eaters had left some corks in the depths of Gringotts, of course, but those were mostly eradicated by now, leaving Bill's work a series of menial, almost boring tasks. He wanted a challenge. He wanted sunshine and travel. He thought of his mother, who was finally occupied by something other than her sons' affairs, and knew that he could make an escape without notice if he went very soon. The birth of Percy and Penelope's son had the whole family wild with joy; they'd hardly bat an eye if Bill suddenly disappeared to the other side of the world. He clasped the pyramid in his fist and made himself a few quick promises. He would help his father destroy the Dementors, giving that problem his full attention once Gringotts was entirely restored. Until then, he'd help the Charmer to get acquainted with the bank. It would speed the process along. And when all of it was done, he'd go back—perhaps to Egypt, perhaps to a new country. Bill rested the pad of his thumb on the point of the pyramid, and thought. He could go to South America. The Mayan temples had always intrigued him. Or he could try Rome; the ruins there were fascinating, and that wizard culture was entirely different from the one he knew. And there was always New York—people said it was the one place where you couldn't tell the Muggles from the wizards.

Or you could go to France, his mind interjected. Bill laughed briefly and wryly at himself, but allowed the thought to stay. He had stopped punishing himself for every thought that led back to Fleur. He supposed he couldn't help it if a beautiful woman hung about in his memory, and besides, there weren't any girls in his life to distract him at the moment. Perhaps one of Charlie's dragon riders would be interesting, or maybe someone would show up at the Ministry before too long. No one at Gringotts was even a remote possibility—though Bill was getting sick enough of his mother's "Any love in your life, dear?" at every family dinner, to consider dating a goblin. Even his father had asked him if he was dating anyone: "How about Rose Brown? Quite pretty." But Bill had only laughed—Mick was very clearly working that corner of the room. No, there was no one at the moment. Even the memory of Fleur grew dimmer all the time. At least, he liked to think that it did.

Bill plunked the little pyramid onto his desk, stood up, and stretched. He was sick of deskwork and daydreams. The quicker he met the new Charmer and got him adjusted to the twists and turns of the underground vaults, the quicker he'd be back in the desert battling Sand Wraiths.

He left his office and walked down the dark, twisting corridor, making eye contact with each goblin he passed. He'd discovered they were more likely to trust him, that way, and though they glared beadily at him as he went by, he was not detained until he rounded a corner and came to a short corridor. It was lit by just one lamp, and etched above the stone archway were the words "Temporary Gringotts Staff". Standing in the archway were three goblins, all narrow-eyed and sharp-toothed. They never trusted temporary staff, and now they glowered at Bill as if, by coming to this place, he was no longer a long-standing Gringotts employee.

"Hey, Bogsmack," he said as easily as he could, to the only one of them he was familiar with. "I'm here to introduce myself to the wizard from Charismatics Spellcraft—the one who'll be working on restoration. Can I pass?"

"Identification," said the goblin on the left.

Bill nodded, and reached for the leather cord on his neck, then groaned. It wasn't there. He'd left it in his desk drawer. "It's in my office—Bill Weasley, Curse Breaker—if one of you would escort me back for it—"

"I'm afraid not," said the one on the right. "Not another step down these halls until we have proved your identity."

"Oh, come on," Bill tried. "Bogsmack, you know it's me."

"Polyjuice," Bogsmack replied thinly. "Glamours. Shape-shifting. These means have all been employed, in the past, to confuse us and take advantage of this bank." The goblin pulled a scroll from his pocket and unrolled it with his thick, knobby fingers. His clawed nails glinted in the dim light. "William Weasley," he read. "Also identifiable by birthmark."

"Now, just a second—"

But Bogsmack ignored Bill's protests and continued. "Lower back, center, just above the tailbone. Eight large, dark freckles in the shape of Cepheus."

Bill knew it was useless to fight. He'd been careless, leaving that I.D. behind. He knew better. Grudgingly, he untucked his shirt and lifted it slightly, turning away from the goblins. Immediately he was pushed against the dam wall; his nose crushed up against his and his forehead smacked hard on the stone. "Easy!" he yelled, turning so that his cheek dug into the wall. Goblin hands pushed up his shirt and tugged down on the waist of his pants, and he felt a pointy fingernail touch each of his oversized freckles.

"There are only seven here," one of them finally said. "Seven freckles."

"I put in for a correction to that list," Bill said irritably. "It's been wrong for three months—Cepheus only has seven stars, check a map."

"That true?" Bogsmack asked his cohorts.

There was a shifting of fabric; perhaps one of the others had shrugged.

"Well it's obviously Cepheus," Bill said, growing more annoyed all the time, "And it's a birthmark, isn't it?" Birthmarks were, for some odd reason, the only body features left unchanged by a Polyjuice Potion. "It's not as if anybody else is going to have one just like that."

"Scrape at it," said one of them. "See if it's paint."

"It isn't *paint*!" But Bill shut up when he saw a door swing open at the end of the short corridor. That had to be the Charmer. Bill winced at the thought of meeting him with goblin hands up his shirt. He felt them pull his trousers down over the band of his knickers. This would make a wonderful first impression.

"Look, are you done?" Bill hissed, hoping for a quick escape. He could go back to his office now, grab his badge, and meet the Charmer under better circumstances.

"I don't remember what Cepheus looks like," one of them admitted. "Inkhorn, go and get the

book."

"For God's sake!" Bill cried in frustration, still staring at the door down the hall and hoping no one would come out of it. But, to his horror, someone did.

The first thing he registered was the hair—sleek, so light in color that it appeared pale even in the orange light of the one lamp, and so long that it eclipsed the face, profile, and even the waist of the person in the doorway. The Charmer was a woman, after all. She tossed her hair behind one shoulder and peered down the hall, her expression a mixture of curiosity and annoyance. When she locked eyes with Bill, however, her face went white and her mouth dropped open. Bill felt his features mimic hers as his heart stopped briefly in his chest.

It was Fleur.

A series of images flashed through Bill's mind, suddenly as sharp as they had been in the weeks following their only meeting. Her eyes full of tears for Percy—that was perhaps the strongest memory. Bill nearly opened his mouth to tell her that he was a brand new uncle, that his brother's baby had been born beautiful and healthy, that they still had a living piece of him. It was a nearly overwhelming urge, and for some reason he felt that she had a right to know—as if they'd been friends for a very long time. He could anticipate her reaction; he knew she would be thrilled, for his sake. He remembered her sister, lost in Mont Ste. Mireille, and he still wanted to lift her grief. He remembered the way she had built the Diversion Enchantments, with simple, powerful efficiency, her fingers steady, cursing under her breath. He still wanted to watch her work. He remembered everything, down to the fit of her form against his, her hands on his neck, sliding beneath his ponytail, the first soft brush of her mouth.

Without meaning to, he began to breathe more heavily than usual. His heart sped up in his chest. She was right there. Really right *there*, not a dream, or a mirage. It was a long, long moment before he realized that his back was bare and his knickers were on display.

"That's enough," he muttered sharply, jerking out of the goblins' grip and turning toward them, never taking his eyes from Fleur's face. He heard the goblins laugh nastily, almost as if they'd been hoping for this embarrassing turn of events, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw all three of them bow very low to Fleur. Bill was shocked by their unusual courtesy, but Fleur didn't seem to notice their adulation or to find it at all disconcerting. She only stared back at him.

"You," she finally managed. Her voice was dry. He recognized it immediately and realized how strange it was that he had not spoken to her for nearly seven months, yet she sounded so familiar. He would have recognized her voice without looking at her: low, lilting with her accent. Beautiful. "You," she repeated, as if dazed. "Bill Weasley."

The three goblins straightened up and turned to leer at Bill, clearly nonplussed to learn that he and the Charmer knew each other.

"We are working to determine," one of them said silkily, "if he is, indeed, William Weasley."

"Yes. Pardon us, Mademoiselle Delacour, as we must... escort him back to his office and check the necessary identification."

"And I'll stay to guard this area against further intruders," Bogsmack said quickly.

Bill would have gaped, if his attention had not been so centered on the pale face at the end of the hall. He had never heard goblins sound so cultured, nor so polite. He was too stunned, both by Fleur's presence and by their odd behavior, to protest when two goblins moved to either side of him, took his arms, and propelled him away from the Temporary Staff corridor, toward his own quarters. Fleur watched him leave, her mouth still partly open, and he did not take his eyes from hers until he had rounded the corner and lost sight of her.

He hardly noticed the goblins after that. In his office, he went through the motions of proving his identity, all the while unable to think in a straight line. Fleur. In London. At Gringotts.

Bill ushered the goblins out, noticing absently that they seemed peeved at being unable to kick him out of the bank altogether. He swung his badge around his neck and went to shut his desk drawer, but first withdrew the note from Charlie. "*These spells are exactly like the ones your old girlfriend used during the war, I'm serious,*" he muttered aloud. "Charlie... you total bastard." He'd had no warning—though he could have had one from his brother—and Fleur had caught him by surprise in a rather humiliating position. "I'll get you," he muttered at the parchment, then crumpled it up and tossed it into the waste bin.

She's here. She's right down that hall. Go on, find her—show her around—ask her how she came to be here. Ask her how she is. Ask her if she knew you were here before she took the job. Give it five minutes, and it'll be just like it was before, you know it. You felt it.

Bill leaned over and rested his hands on his desk, still breathing oddly, still unable to believe whom he'd just seen. He thought about crying off work and running to the pub. Or to the Ministry. Or home, to his mother.

A knock on the door sent Bill three feet into the air. "Come in," he called, his voice cracking for the first time in at least eight years. The door opened and Bill forced himself to look up.

She stood there, so beautiful that he couldn't really comprehend it. He'd told himself again and again that he'd glamorized her memory, that she hadn't really been perfect, but he'd grossly understated it instead. She was beyond perfect. She was—

She was a veela.

Bill remembered that fact with sudden fierceness, and sat down abruptly in his chair. He hadn't thought about it in a long time—he hadn't had to—but she'd tricked him once. The feelings he was having—he'd had them before. They were overpowering, yes, but they weren't real feelings. They were induced by her magic, or her... whatever it was. She'd manipulated him, and then left without a word the next morning. He remembered *that* feeling; *it* had been real enough. It wasn't going to happen again.

"Hello," he said with surprising evenness. "Come in."

Fleur hesitated, then stepped into the office and shut the door behind her. Torches burned in sconces on either side of her, sending light across her hair and skin. She swallowed visibly, then smiled at him.

Bill wondered how long his resolve was going to last, in the wake of a smile like that. He looked down at his papers, took up a quill, and tapped it needlessly against a bit of parchment as if he were going to take notes. He glanced up at her. "Fleur... what was it?"

"Delacour," she said, very quietly, her eyes alight. "You remember me."

He cursed himself inwardly. They hadn't said her first name; he'd remembered that from months ago. He shouldn't have admitted it. "Of course," he said briskly. "You did the Diversion Enchantments for my brother, last February—and out at Azkaban yesterday," he added, for good measure.

"Oh, zen you..." Fleur's forehead creased slightly between her eyebrows. "You knew I was 'ere?"

The accent was killing him. "Sure," he said lightly. "Charlie said the charms you set up were fantastic. That's great news."

She smiled again. "Yes. It was 'ard, but zey should keep trouble away. I thought it was so interesting, what your-brother—" she pronounced the word carefully, and Bill remembered that she had once said "bruzzer", "—is trying with ze dragons. I 'ope it works."

"Well, I can't see why it wouldn't," Bill said, looking down at his paperwork again. He found he couldn't concentrate when he looked at her, and vowed to kick Charlie's ass when he got home. There was supposed to be a nice, strong, Love Charm Repellant on him. It should have worked on everything, from simple Kissing Solutions to veela airwaves, and it wasn't working at all. Her power was stronger than whatever Charlie had done; she even had the goblins falling all over themselves, and Bill realized that he wasn't going to be able to control himself much longer with her in his space. He wanted to talk to her. Tell her everything. Act as if no time had passed. He had an idiotic feeling that it was what he was *supposed* to do, and that she even wanted him to do it.

"I did not know you worked for Gringotts." She was coming closer to his desk, dropping pensively into the chair across from his. "I worried... I am glad you were not 'urt in ze war."

She wondered. She's thought about it.

"Thanks," Bill said, feeling quite strangled by her proximity. He couldn't look up, but even as he pretended to be occupied with his papers, he caught glimpses of swinging blonde hair, and of slim hands clasped together on the edge of his desk. "I'm, er—glad you're all right, as well." He randomly shuffled a few forms. "I don't suppose your sister was ever found." His voice was low. He hadn't been able to help asking, and when he noticed her fingers tremble in response, he watched his own hands reach across the desk. Her fingers slid into his grasp and they held tightly to each other, instinctively, as they had in the trench.

"Gabrielle is gone. And your-brother?"

"Percy's dead." Bill looked up, knowing what he would see. Her eyes were as dark and sad as they had been once. "But his wife had a baby," Bill told her, watching her face brighten as he spoke, "just yesterday. She was pregnant when—and it's a boy. I have a picture—my little sister took a bunch with some sort of Muggle thing, so it doesn't move like a normal one, but—"

"Please, may I see it?"

Bill let go of one of her hands and fished in his pocket for the snapshot. Ginny had taken loads of them, enough for everyone, and Bill thought he'd got the best of the lot. Little Percy's eyes were open, pale blue and wondering, and his mouth was wide.

"Ohh..." Fleur took the picture and, after studying it for a long time, gave Bill a brilliant smile though her eyes swam with tears. "He is perfect."

"I know."

"What is his name?"

"Percival Leander."

"Congratulations—" Fleur stood without letting go of Bill's other hand, and leaned across the desk. Before Bill knew what was coming, she had swiftly kissed both his cheeks, and she left her face against his for a brief moment. Her cheek was soft. She smelled like rain. Bill drew a deep breath and leaned closer, wondering how he had lasted so long since their first meeting, feeling his blood pound in all the parts of him that counted. Fleur drew back slightly, resting her mouth just to the left of his, and Bill very nearly forgot that he was at work, and that the desk between them was not technically intended, by Gringotts Bank, to serve as anything other than a desk.

"Oh, I 'oped I would see you..." she was saying, quietly. He felt her whisper move across his skin. "But I did not really think... I sometimes thought that it was never real."

Bill pulled back, quite suddenly, and looked at her. "So did I," he said slowly. "Mostly because you disappeared." He let go of her hand and waited for an answer. He hadn't meant to let the conversation get this far; he'd meant to keep everything professional, to behave as if nothing had ever passed between them—which it hadn't. Not really. Not if she'd Charmed him. But as long as they weren't going to pretend anything, he needed answers. "Where the hell did you go? And why?"

She flushed, and looked disconcerted. "I am sorry," she said. "I was needed somewhere else, and when my escort arrived, we did not have time to wait."

"You could've at least woken me."

"I am sorry," she repeated, keeping her eyes on his. "Forgive me."

"And after all we'd talked about... well, I didn't know what to think, I'll tell you that." He laughed roughly, trying not to show how much her sudden departure had hurt him.

"Bill—"

"Right, *and* you knew my full name—you could've looked me up if you were so worried about me."

Fleur didn't answer. Neither did she move her gaze. It was deep, and blue, and sorrowful—and impossible to look away from.

"Stop looking at me like that," Bill snapped, wondering if this was how she hypnotized people. He tried to take his eyes away, and couldn't.

"Please let me..."

"No—*stop looking at me*. Never mind, I'm making an ass of myself and it's not even my fault, is it?" Bill forced another laugh. "Look, you don't have to explain. I know what you are. I know what really happened."

The longing expression in Fleur's eyes vanished, and was instantly replaced by something else—something cool and shallow. Her face became a mask. She looked prettier than she ever had, but the prettiness was brittle; the depth of her beauty was gone. She was a doll girl, suddenly, and not a woman. The transition shocked Bill.

"And what am I?" she asked quietly, her tone dangerous.

Bill swallowed. "You're a veela," he said. He hadn't meant it to sound like an accusation, but Fleur visibly recoiled.

"Yes I am," she said haughtily after a pause. "I am one-quarter veela. Not a pureblood. Not zat you would know anything about ze differences." She stood and smoothed her robes, flashing him an artful smile. He flinched, not certain as to why. "Well, it was lovely speaking wiz you, Monsieur Weasley." She went to the door.

"Wait," he said, standing, "I didn't mean anything by it. I'm just saying, you know, if you're part veela, then chances are I was... well... acting under the influence."

Fleur smiled at him again, another perfect, heartless smile that made him feel a little sick. "Of course you were," she said, and reached for the door handle.

"Look, you're going to need a guide around the bank, so whether you're going to speak to me or not—"

"Ze goblins will be more zan helpful, I assure you." She opened the door and swept through it, gave him one last dazzling smile—so bright that it made Bill's eyes hurt—then shut the door between them without further ceremony. Before it slammed into place, he thought he heard her mutter: "I should 'ave known."

A/N: Thanks to Jedi Boadicea for writing "Job Hazards", and giving us such a clear picture of Bill in Egypt. Sand Wraiths belong to her (Sphynxes are part of popular mythology, but we used her spelling and had her history in mind.)

And thanks to Moey, for giving the baby a perfect middle name.

This story is dedicated to Old Man Pants...

Veela

As soon as the goblins had left her alone at what was going to be her office for as long as she stayed in London, Fleur started to unpack the few items that she had brought with her. Some books about Charms she thought she might need, although unlikely, and a few papers from *Charismatics* that the goblins would have to sign once she was finished.

She was just finished organizing her books on one of the shelves in her office, when the door swung open. Clearly, the goblins hadn't closed it properly when they had left.

Fleur sighed and turned to close the door after placing the last book on the shelf, but hearing a commotion outside, she hesitated for only a moment before reaching for the doorknob.

Fleur opened it and stepped outside, tossing her hair behind her shoulder and peering down the hall for the source of the commotion.

When she saw the man being held against the wall by the goblins, Fleur stopped dead in her tracks. Her eyes widened in disbelief, as the color drained of her face and her mouth hung open.

The man she had been longing to meet in London, even though she would never admit it out loud, was right there in front of her.

His long ginger hair tied up looked as if on fire under the orange light of the room, his shirt strained against muscular shoulders and arms were being held high on his back by the goblins, revealing a smooth and muscular lower back, and his pants...

Fleur caught herself and looked into his eyes, before he realized where her eyes had been drifting. At the same moment, he muttered something sharply to the goblins, jerked out of their grip, and turned to them, never taking his eyes off her.

Much like he had done all those months ago in the trench, when he had patiently watched her testing the strength of the Enchantment she had cast to keep the dragons hidden.

"You," she finally choked out. Her voice was dry. She could do nothing but stare back at him and remember that night in the trench. The feeling of his arms around her when he had first embraced her, trying to give her the strength he didn't have to comfort her when he learned about the loss of her sister, even though he had lost a brother himself.

"You," she repeated, trying to shake off all her past memories but the memory of Charlie Weasley saying his brother's name. "Bill Weasley."

"We are working to determine," one of the goblins, whom Fleur had completely forgotten about, said silkily, "if he is, indeed, William Weasley."

"Yes. Pardon us, Mademoiselle Delacour, as we must... escort him back to his office and check the necessary identification."

"And I'll stay to guard this area against further intruders," the third goblin said quickly.

Fleur was too stunned by Bill's sudden appearance to properly pay attention to any of the words the goblins said, or to protest against the goblins taking him away from her. She hadn't even registered yet the fact that Bill was really here, only a few paces away from her. Bill felt like a dream to her, and as a dream, he could easily and quickly be taken away.

Fleur shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts, and felt the blood coming back to it. She wasn't hallucinating. After all, she had expected, no, *hoped*, that Bill Weasley would be here in London. Alive.

Just not at Gringotts.

She turned to the goblin next to her, but kept her eyes to the last spot where she had seen Bill's face before he had rounded the corner.

She quickly refreshed in her head what the goblins had just said, and asked, "You said you were escorting him back to his office? Does he work 'ere?"

"Well, if he really is who he claims to be... Yes. William Weasley works as a Curse Breaker here at Gringotts."

That sure explained why Charlie Weasley had insisted upon bringing her to Gringotts and introducing her to the Curse Breaker. He had said that the Curse Breaker was an old *friend* of his, and even though his girlfriend had kept shooting him dark looks, Charlie had Apparated with Fleur to London. He had only given up when the goblins had threatened to strip search him, and had hastily left a message to his *friend* before Apparating back to Azkaban.

Fleur thought for a moment about her next course of action. She remembered how her grandmother had always said that men were not to be trusted, and feared that deep down she already trusted Bill more than reason would allow.

That was so unlike her.

But not as unlikely as what she did next. Fleur asked the goblin where she would find Bill's office and went after him.

When she stopped outside his door, Fleur paused for a moment.

Her usual detached and cool composure was completely altered by the swirl of emotions inside her.

Bill was alive. He had survived the war.

Fleur shut her eyes more forcefully than she had intended and gulped. She could not let her happiness of seeing Bill alive and, most of all, her feelings towards him, cloud her judgement. She needed to keep her feelings under control. If she didn't, they would blind her common sense, intelligence and self-assurance, impairing her actions.

That had been quite a problem in her young age, but she had learned how to deal with it. However, every now and then she lost her control.

It had happened during the Second Task in the Triwizard Tournament, when her fear for her sister had blinded her to the Grindylows surrounding her. It had happened when Gabrielle had disappeared, and it threatened to happen again every time she remembered her sister. And it had happened that night in the trench when she had lost herself in Bill's arms.

Sighing deeply and checking one last time that her feelings were under control, Fleur knocked on the door.

"Come in." Bill answered from behind the door, his voice obviously cracking. Fleur couldn't help but smile at that. She opened the door.

The moment her eyes fell on Bill again, Fleur found herself struggling to keep her cool composure at all costs, but she recognized that it wasn't going to be an easy task.

Bill Weasley was a very fascinating man.

He sat abruptly in his chair. This sudden movement snapped Fleur from her appreciation reverie, and she focused her eyes on his trying to focus in their impending conversation rather than the pale blue color of his eyes.

"Hello," Bill said evenly. "Come in."

That surprised Fleur, and she hesitated for a moment before finally stepping into Bill's office and shutting the door behind her. She felt her throat dry with fear. What if Bill didn't remember her? She swallowed and smiled at him, hopefully.

He quickly averted his eyes from her, looking down at a bit of parchment on his desk and tapping on it with a quill. Fleur felt devastated. He didn't remember her.

He glanced up at her. "Fleur...what was it?"

A wave of relief flooded into Fleur, and she answered very quietly, afraid of showing just how happy she was that Bill remembered her. "Delacour." Her eyes alight with delight she couldn't help but add, "You remember me."

"Of course," he said briskly, much to her dismay. The sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach that had been lifted once he recognized her came back. "You did the Diversion Enchantments for my brother, last February - and out at Azkaban yesterday."

"Oh, zen you..." Her forehead creased slightly in her effort to focus in their conversation instead of her conflicting emotions. "You knew I was 'ere?"

She cursed inwardly. Of course he knew. Charlie had left him a message, hadn't he?

"Sure," he said in a lighter tone than before, to Fleur's relief. "Charlie said the charms you set up were fantastic. That's great news."

She couldn't help but smile again. "Yes. It was 'ard, but zey should keep trouble away. I thought it was interesting what your - brother -" Fleur carefully pronounced the word, hoping to show Bill how her English had improved since the last time they met, "- is trying with ze dragons. I 'ope it works."

"Well, I can't see why it wouldn't," Bill said, looking down at his paperwork again.

When Bill looked down, Fleur felt a stab of pain in her heart. Even though they were in the same room, it felt like they were miles away... "I did not know you worked for Gringotts."

Fleur approached the table, wondering what could possibly have happened to make Bill act this way, and wishing desperately that things remained like no time had passed since last February. She just wanted to be near Bill, to touch him and to be touched by him. The concern she had felt during the war, dreading to hear news about Bill's death, hadn't quite worn off.

She sat down in the chair across from Bill's. "I worried... I am glad you were not hurt in the war."

"Thanks," Bill answered in a heavy voice.

Impulsively, Fleur leaned forward, her hair cascading around her shoulders, and reached out to Bill. But she caught hold of herself in time, and clasping her hands together, she rested them on the edge of his desk. With any luck, Bill hadn't noticed anything, so absorbed he seemed to be with the papers on his desk.

"I'm, er-glad you're all right, as well."

As eager as Fleur was to learn if Bill had been worried about her dying during the war, she was beginning to feel annoyed by the fact that he seemed more engrossed in his paperwork than her.

"I don't suppose your sister was ever found." His voice was low, but clear enough for Fleur to understand it.

At the simple mention of Gabrielle, Fleur's whole body trembled. But before she could answer, Bill did something completely unexpected. He reached out to grasp her fingers in his hands, and they held tightly to each other, instinctively, as they had in the trench. He had an instantaneous soothing effect upon Fleur's despair for her sister.

"Gabrielle is gone. And your - brother?"

"Percy's dead."

At this news, Fleur felt her heart heavy with sadness.

Bill looked up. "But his wife had a baby," he added in a rush, "just yesterday. She was pregnant when -," he digressed for barely one second, "and it's a boy. I have a picture - my little sister took a bunch with some sort of Muggle thing, so it doesn't move like a normal one, but -"

"Please, may I see it?" Fleur asked, before Bill rambled any longer. He seemed anxious to lighten the subject of their conversation, and she couldn't blame him.

He let go of one of her hands and took a picture from his pocket, giving it to her.

"Ohh..." Fleur looked at the picture, studying the baby's smooth skin, his mouth wide with sleep, and his marveling pale blue eyes, just like... "He is perfect." *Just like his uncle.*

"I know." Fleur detected a small hint of pride in Bill's voice.

"What is his name?"

"Percival Leander."

"Congratulations -" It was a habit Fleur had to kiss people in congratulations or thanks, so she automatically stood to give Bill's cheeks one kiss each.

She didn't expect to be affected by this closeness, though. She felt dizzy, and trying to steady herself before standing up, her face lingered against Bill's for a brief moment. He leaned his head closer to hers, and Fleur drew back slightly, almost reaching for his mouth with hers instinctively. "Oh, I 'oped I would see you..." She whispered, trying not to think about kissing Bill. "But I did not really think... I sometimes thought that it was never real."

Bill pulled back suddenly, and Fleur felt a fleeting chill where his warm face had been against hers. "So did I," he said slowly looking at her. "Mostly because you disappeared." He let go of her other hand.

Fleur didn't understand this sudden change of demeanor. She sat back down in the chair, stalling for time to think. Bill was acting really strange. First he had seemed not to remember her, then he had been sweet and warm towards her just like last February, and now he was mad at her?

"Where the hell did you go? And why?"

Well, that answered her question. But what had he expected her to do?

Fleur flushed as realization dawned on her. *Stay with him?* Bill had thrown her off balance.

"I am sorry," Fleur said, not really wanting to fight. "I was needed somewhere else, and when my escort arrived, we did not have time to wait."

"You could've at least woken me." Bill had a hurt and at the same time defiant look on his face.

"I am sorry," Fleur repeated, trying to will her words to enter Bill's mind. "Forgive me."

"And after all we'd talked about... well, I didn't know what to think, I'll tell you that."

Bill barked a laugh and Fleur shuddered slightly. She had really hurt him. "Bill -"

"Right, *and* you knew my full name - you could have looked me up if you were so worried about me."

Fleur didn't answer. Bill was right. She could have looked him up. But she had been too afraid to do so and find out that he had died.

She looked deeply into his eyes, trying to find out if she had lost what could possibly be her only shot at happiness. Fleur felt completely distressed and saddened just by thinking about this possibility. She couldn't imagine how much worse she would feel if this actually turned out to be true. She hoped she hadn't hurt Bill that much. She wanted so much...

"Stop looking at me like that," Bill snapped at her.

"Please let me..." Fleur began, but was cut off by Bill.

"No - *stop looking at me*. Never mind, I'm making an ass of myself and it's not even my fault, is it?" His voice was dripping with sarcasm. He choked out another laugh and added, "Look, you don't have to explain. I know what you are. I know what really happened."

Fleur froze. The way Bill was acting towards her, asking, no, *commanding* her to stop looking at him...he surely didn't think that she had...that she had used her Veela charm on him, did he?

The anger rising inside her released the Veela. Fleur kept her emotions hidden beneath a cool mask, but she was boiling in anger. Here she was, chastising herself for not looking for news about Bill after the war, and he was accusing her of using the gift, no, the *curse* she had inherited from her grandmother on him? Surely, he would have the common sense not to think like that about her.

There was only one way to be certain.

"And what am I?" she asked quietly, barely controlling her anger, her tone dangerous.

Bill swallowed, visibly nervous under her gaze. Good. "You're a Veela," he said, in what was undeniably an accusatory tone.

Fleur withdrew in revulsion. *I can't believe that he is holding the fact that I'm one-quarter veela against me!*

After a pause to barely control her anger, she added, "Yes, I am. I am one-quarter veela. Not a pureblood. Not that you would know anything about the differences." She spat at Bill. Obviously he didn't know that only pureblood veelas had that kind of power all the time, and that part-veelas like her could turn it off whenever they wanted.

Fleur stood up and smoothed her robes, flashing him her most dashing and dangerous smile. He flinched. "Well, it was lovely speaking with you, Monsieur Weasley." She turned and went to the door.

"Wait," he said, and Fleur turned to see him standing, "I didn't mean anything by it. I'm just saying, you know, if you're part veela, then chances are I was... well... acting under the influence."

Fleur smiled cruelly at him again. It was a little bit late to feel sorry for the way he had acted, wasn't it? "Of course you were," she said, and reached for the door handle.

"Look, you're going to need a guide around the bank, so whether you're going to speak to me or not -"

"The goblins will be more than helpful, I assure you." She opened the door and swept through it, one last dazzling smile on her lips, then proceeded to shut the door behind her muttering, "I should have known."

Men were not to be trusted.

— CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE —

Pure Nerve

“Oi, Potter! Get your lazy arse out of that bed! Oi, Potter! Get your lazy arse out of that bed! Oi, Potter! Get your lazy arse—”

Harry slammed his hand down on the alarm, his heart sinking at the sound of Oliver’s voice. He reached for his wand and lit his bedside lamp, squinting against the light.

“You should get a different clock,” Ron mumbled, rolling out of bed. He stood in the middle of the room, looking confused. “Early,” he muttered. “Too early.” He went slowly towards his bureau and began dressing.

“Where do you have to be?” Harry asked, sticking his glasses on his nose and getting up as well. He wondered what sort of robes he ought to wear for dragon riding, then decided that it didn’t matter. Whatever he wore would get burnt to a crisp.

“Going to London.” Ron was struggling, in a state of half-sleep, to get his arm through his sleeve. It came out the neck of his robes and he grunted.

“With Sirius?” Harry pulled on a set of old Hogwarts robes over his shirt and trousers, wondering if it was stupid to go about with a Gryffindor crest on, now that school was out. But the only other robes he had were either for dress affairs or Quidditch; he hadn’t ever thought about getting normal ones. “Are you going to the Ministry?”

“Yeah. Wouldn’t hurt to see a real trial.” Ron managed to get his robes on properly, and he buttoned them up. “Anyway, if it’s boring, I’ll go say hi to Bill.”

“Cool.” Harry tied his shoes and straightened up, holding his stomach with one hand. He was going to throw up. He knew he should probably eat breakfast—going to Azkaban on an empty stomach was probably a really stupid idea; he’d need energy to ride a dragon. But Harry had a very clear memory of coming face to face with the Hungarian Horntail, and knew that it was suicide to get anywhere near a fifty-foot, fire-breathing creature, let alone go riding on top of one. Fear made eating seem impossible.

“Let’s eat.” Ron tucked his money pouch into his pocket and grabbed the door knob. “Come on, Harry,” he said, turning back when Harry didn’t answer. He gave Harry a knowing look. “Look, none of your ‘not hungry’ business today. If you’re going to be an idiot and do this thing, then you’re doing it like a normal...” Ron shook his head. “Never mind the normal bit. Just eat something.”

Harry wanted to smile, but his nerves prevented it. “I think I’m going to be sick,” he managed.

“Yeah, well, I’d be sick too if I was going to do what you’re doing. Oh, come on, Harry, I’m kidding. You know it’s safe enough. It’s madness, but the dragons are trained, and if you’ve lived through...” Ron sighed, and smoothed down his hair. “If you can’t eat now, take something with you, all right?”

“All right.”

“Come on, then.”

“Be down in a minute.”

Ron shook his head, looking exasperated and rather like Hermione, but went downstairs without saying anything else. Harry looked around the room, wondering morbidly whether he’d ever see it again, then decided to take Ron’s advice and bring food with him. He grabbed his old satchel and headed towards the kitchen.

“Harry.”

Harry turned at the top of the stairs, and stiffened. Sirius was standing outside his own door, dressed for court and looking quite grave. “Hey, Sirius,” he said, as lightly as he could. “Have a good trial.”

Sirius seemed not to hear him. “We haven’t talked.” He rubbed his chin, and Harry could hear the scrape of unshaven skin against his godfather’s fingers. Sirius still had bags under his eyes, and he hadn’t looked so thin since just after his escape from Azkaban. “Charlie assures me that

the dragons are very well trained and that there's very little danger to you from the... Dementors. Apparently the dragons are able to deflect..." Sirius seemed to lose his train of thought. He shut his eyes and sharply shook his head.

"Sirius?" Harry asked carefully. He felt strange and awkward, talking about Azkaban with Sirius. He had no idea how to navigate the conversation.

Sirius opened his eyes and laughed harshly. "Here it is, Harry. I know you can take care of yourself, but damn it, don't let me hear that you've been within fifty yards of one of those things."

"I'm not planning to get any closer than I have to," Harry said truthfully.

"And no heroics."

Harry bristled. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Sirius gave him a grim smile. "It means I want you to keep safe. It means I don't want you taking stupid, unnecessary risks."

"Fine." Harry gripped his bag, wondering just what he'd done that was so stupid and unnecessary that deserved this warning. Perhaps he shouldn't have done anything in the fight against Voldemort. Perhaps that had been a big show of stupid heroics. "Anything else?"

"If you're asked to do anything that's more strenuous or dangerous than any other rider, I want you to refuse."

Harry snorted softly. He couldn't think of anything more dangerous or strenuous than holding back Dementors with flight-trained dragons. "Yeah, all right," he said, letting an edge of sarcasm creep into his voice. He wasn't sure why, but Sirius's advice was highly irritating at the moment.

"And if you—" Sirius began, but Harry held up his hand.

"Hold on," he said, turning his head toward the girls' room and listening closely. There had been a noise.

Sirius sighed. "Harry, I know that after what you've seen you probably don't appreciate being told—"

"Hold on," Harry hissed.

Sirius frowned, but bent his head to listen. "What is it?"

Harry strained to hear it again—a low, tearful sound, like a voice. He could have sworn he'd heard—

"No...Tom..." There was a thrashing noise of sheets being thrown about.

Sirius's frown deepened. "Is that Ginny?" he whispered, and moved to pass Harry and open the girls' room door.

Harry blocked him. "Have a good trial," he repeated quickly. "I'll do what you said—I'll be fine." As he spoke, he backed towards Ginny's door and groped for the handle until he found it. "See you," he said, then pushed his way into the room and shut the door behind him, leaving a very surprised-looking Sirius standing in the hall.

The room was still dark, as the shades were drawn, and Harry hesitated at the door, waiting for his eyes to adjust.

"Please...not Harry..." The words were more moaned than spoken as Ginny's desperate, mumbling, one-way conversation continued. Harry shivered. He didn't have to hear Tom Riddle's threats to know what they were. It was an old nightmare, and Hermione wasn't home to do anything about it.

He could see Ginny now. She lay flat on her back with her covers kicked off and her nightdress twisted around her, revealing a good part of one pale, freckled leg. Harry faltered, suddenly not sure if he should be in here, nightmare or not. Crookshanks eyed him from Hermione's empty pillow as Ginny's hands thrashed uselessly at her sides.

"You're not him..."

Harry didn't know what to do. Her words were so clear that it was as if she was awake with her eyes closed. Her face was white and taut, and her breathing grew labored.

"Go back in...go back in...let me out—someone help me—"

She was as frightened as if it were real; real tears slid from the corners of her closed eyes and coursed down her temples. Unable to watch any longer, Harry went to her side and copied the things he had seen Hermione do. Ignoring the pounding in his blood, and doing his best not to notice how closely her nightdress fitted to the top of her, Harry sat gingerly on the edge of her bed and took her hand. It was hot and sweaty, and he repeatedly smoothed it, stroking her fingers and hushing her as quietly as he could.

"Ginny, he's gone. It's all right."

"Harry..." She rolled slightly towards him.

"I'm here." He squeezed her hand and watched her face relax, just a fraction. He continued to

touch her gently, in what he hoped was a soothing way, letting his fingers travel up to her elbow and back down again. When her expression softened, he did it again, and continued to repeat the action until her breathing was regular. She rolled entirely onto her side, burying her face against the outside of Harry's thigh and throwing her arm across his leg.

Harry looked down at the bit of Ginny's profile he could see, feeling oddly at ease. He brushed her damp hair away from her cheek, felt her sigh against his leg, and he wished it were so easy to sit near her and touch her when she was awake. He also wished that he didn't have to leave; he wouldn't have minded sitting next to Ginny and guarding her sleep until she woke up. He waited as long as he possibly could before Disapparating for work.

"Bye," he whispered, when he didn't have another minute to spare. As if Ginny had heard him, she tightened her arm around his legs. Very gently, Harry pried her loose, and he couldn't help smiling when she rolled onto her back with a bit of a pout on her sleeping face. "Sleep tight," he said quietly, bending his face close to hers.

And then, because it seemed the natural thing to do, he kissed her.

It was quick, and soft, and Ginny didn't even stir, but Harry drew away with a pounding heart, staring down at her face. His mouth burned. The sun was rising outside; it sliced through the blinds and lit up Ginny's face in sections, illuminating her skin and hair. She stretched her arms over her head and sighed—and her eyes blinked open.

Harry froze. She was awake. But she hadn't focused on him—hadn't recognized him—she would go back to sleep if he stayed still. Harry held his breath and waited, his pulse racing. When Ginny's eyes fell shut again, he exhaled in relief. And when she rolled away onto her other side, Harry got up from her bed, drew his wand, and Disapparated.

A moment later, he stumbled into a dimly lit room. There were about a dozen people standing around, some talking, and some standing in corners, looking nervous. He picked out Charlie Weasley's bright head of hair and waved when Charlie turned around.

"All right everyone," said Charlie, acknowledging Harry with a nod and then addressing the group. "We're just waiting for one more, and then we'll get started."

Harry took the opportunity to look around the room. He saw Charlie's friend Mick talking to a woman he recognized as Lavender Brown's sister. There were two older, burly-looking men who looked like they'd dealt with dragons before. They were joking with a tall woman with long blonde hair who was gripping an old, rather scorched, Nimbus Two-Thousand tightly in her hand. They all seemed very tall and grown-up to Harry, who scratched at the Hogwarts crest on his robes and wondered if there was a spell to remove it without leaving a mark.

"It is good to see you again, Harry Potter." Harry turned to see Viktor Krum standing in behind him. He smiled, relieved that there was someone here that he knew, and shook Viktor's hand.

"You're riding the dragons?" Harry asked. "Brilliant."

"Yes," said Viktor, who did not look quite as surly as he used to. "My wife, Rositza, she thinks it is exciting. She is not magic, and does not understand the danger of dragons."

"Your wife?" said Harry, curiously. Ron would certainly be interested to hear this information. He realized that Hermione was probably quite aware that Viktor had married, and had never bothered to inform Ron.

Viktor nodded, standing a bit straighter than normal. "Yes, I vos married two years ago. Ve haff a young daughter now—her name is Alanna. Tell me," continued Viktor, lowering his voice. "That girl there, who is talking to Mr. Veasley—is she also from Hogvorts? I saw her flying once."

Harry moved his head so that he could see where Viktor was looking. He blinked. In the dim light of the room, he could make out short, spiky hair, not unlike his own. He couldn't see her face, but something about her posture was very familiar. At that moment, the girl looked over at them, and smiled broadly at Harry. She said something to Charlie and then walked to where Viktor and Harry were standing.

It was Cho Chang. Harry hadn't seen her since she had left Hogwarts and he had been so preoccupied with Voldemort that he hadn't even bothered to wonder what she'd been doing. She looked even prettier than usual with her short hair. He felt a familiar flip-flop in his stomach when she said "Hello, Harry" and introduced herself to Viktor Krum, although he soon found himself reflecting that he'd never noticed how short she was. He'd grown used to Ginny, who was almost as tall as he was, and who always seemed to be looking him in the eyes.

"You're flying the dragons too?" asked Harry. Cho had been an excellent Seeker when she had been on the Ravenclaw Quidditch team.

Cho jerked her head in Charlie's direction. "I've been working with the dragons for the past year. I started just out of Hogwarts as an apprentice, and then got promoted to Charlie's assistant just before the end of the war."

The three of them talked for a few minutes. Viktor apparently already knew that Hermione was at Cortona, which didn't surprise Harry at all. Cho gushed over a picture of a pretty, giggling baby that Viktor kept tucked in a locket under his vest, and told Harry that she hoped to get to the Burrow to see Leo very soon. Harry was surprised that Cho knew about the baby, but quickly remembered that Penny had been in Ravenclaw. Cho began to reassure them that riding dragons was really okay, once you got the hang of it, when the door to the headquarters burst open. A draft of cold air made the hairs on Harry's neck stand on end, and what he saw in the doorway did nothing to calm his nerves.

Draco Malfoy stood in the doorway looking amazingly healthy for someone who had supposedly suffered lasting damage to his head, despite the large bandage that circled his "injury" at an angle. Then again, Harry reflected, he hadn't thought Malfoy's head had been entirely right to begin with, and he wondered what Malfoy thought he was on about, busting into private Ministry business—certainly he wasn't going to volunteer to ride a dragon. Harry snorted at the memory of Malfoy, wailing for months about what Buckbeak had done to him. Hippogriff claws paled in comparison with dragon talons; Malfoy didn't have the guts.

Malfoy strode over to Lavender's sister and began to speak with her in quiet tones, but their voices carried. Harry could make out what they were saying, but he didn't understand.

"... Mordor's stable is in terrible condition. It's bad enough that he's being exposed to such terrible weather, but I am not paying extra money to have him receiving the same care as the common ..."

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy, I understand. We'll see to it immediately..." Over Rose's head, Malfoy caught sight of Harry and he twisted his face into an even more unpleasant scowl.

"All right everyone!" Charlie's voice was loud, and everyone stood at attention. "Follow me! We're going to give you your uniforms and introduce you to some common equipment."

They all followed Charlie through a narrow corridor to a sort of locker room, Harry keeping one eye on Malfoy, who stayed with the group as if he had something to do with it. They came to a large, narrow table, which ran the length of the wall and contained very heavy-looking robes and other gadgets. Charlie stood next to it with his friend Mick. Cho moved up to the front with them, and Malfoy slid into her space, right next to Harry. Harry shot him an irritable look, but bit his tongue; Lavender's sister had just begun to speak in a business-like tone.

"We would like to welcome you all and thank you for accepting the task of joining the Permanent Azkaban Patrol. I am Rose K. Brown, Secretary Privy to the Minister of Magic, and am in charge of supervising this operation. You will notice me visiting on occasion, and should you have any problems that you don't feel comfortable discussing with your immediate supervisors, Mr. Charles Weasley and Mr. Michael O'Malley"—she gestured to Charlie and Mick in turn—"then you may speak with me. Your safety is the Ministry's biggest concern..."

Harry stopped listening to her after a while. He was more interested in the equipment on the table, and only began to pay attention when Charlie started to explain how the robes worked, what the special gloves were made out of, and when to use the Omnioculars. Cho held up each piece of gear in turn and passed it around to each of the riders as Charlie spoke. She obviously knew how to use everything, and, Harry reminded himself, had ridden a dragon before as well. He knew that Charlie and Mick had ridden dragons, and he looked around the room. The two older men and the woman with them must have ridden dragons during the war. All three of them dismissively passed the equipment back to Mick without glancing at it, and one of the men already seemed to be wearing appropriate dragon-riding attire.

What had he gotten himself into? Ron and Ginny were right. He was completely mad. Harry wondered for a moment if Voldemort had placed a curse on him as a small child that gave him a compulsion to lead himself into danger.

"Potter, are you going to adopt that belt, or are you going to pass it on?" He heard Malfoy's drawling voice and looked down to see a pale hand stretched impatiently in front of him. He handed the wand belt to Malfoy without looking at his face, although he did notice that Malfoy was wearing a familiar ring. It was familiar because the pattern of the giant "M" in the center of it had been imprinted on Ron's face for several days. Harry felt a new wave of fury, and turned to glare at Malfoy.

"What's the matter, Potter?" Malfoy turned his head disdainfully and gave a pointed smirk at Harry's Gryffindor badge. "Don't like sharing? Want to be heroic all on your own?"

"Just trying to work out what you think you're doing here," Harry replied, through gritted teeth.

"You're not the only Quidditch player who was invited." Malfoy smiled. "Difficult to take, isn't it?"

"The P.A.P. must've been hard up for a ninth rider." Harry retorted, his hands clenching angrily.

Malfoy was going to dragon ride. He was going to be around, making this whole thing a hundred times worse. Harry seethed, and muttered under his breath, "You must not've made the Falcons if you bothered coming up here."

"Oh, no," replied Draco, in a voice that could freeze water, "I could have had a position on the team. I just thought *this* would be much more interesting."

"More interesting than hanging around hospitals, acting injured to get people in trouble?"

"Can't imagine *what* you're talking about. And if you think the fact that I'm able to walk again is going to help Weasley in court, then you—" Draco stopped himself in an uncharacteristic act of will power and grunted. Harry didn't have time to come up with any sort of nasty response, because Charlie was now unrolling a large map, which hovered in the air in front of them.

"This is a map of the area," explained Mick. "We'll be giving you all copies to take home. It's important to memorize how everything is set up. Azkaban is at the center." He pointed his wand at a drawing of Azkaban and it became three dimensional, floating in front of its space on the map. Harry could see dark windows, cold, wet rocks, and grey walls. At the base of the fortress, small, robed figures slithered in and out of caves and doors. Dementors. Harry shivered. Draco snickered—his posture was easy, and there was no trace of fear in his expression. He seemed to smile at the Dementors, and Harry felt distinctly uneasy.

Mick pointed out several gaps in the prison walls, then restored the Azkaban fortress to the map. He drew a green ring in the water around the island, and it began to glow. "So far, the Aurors have been keeping the Dementors from migrating farther than this. Of course, a few have slipped through the cracks. That's unacceptable. We're hoping that the dragons will enable us to keep all of the Dementors on the island itself..."

The training continued throughout the morning. He, Viktor and Malfoy were paired off with the more experienced riders and would be trained in flight over the course of the next week. The man who was already outfitted in dragon-riding gear, and whose name was Burke, assured Harry that riding a dragon was a hundred times more wonderful than flying on a broomstick. Harry thought about asking why Burke had only volunteered to be on the relief crew, if it was so wonderful, but he bit his tongue and looked around the room at everyone else.

Mick was strapping on a fireproof vest and demonstrating its cords to Lavender's sister, who was jotting things down on a notepad. Cho pointed out something on the map to Charlie, and he listened to every word she said, his brow furrowed in concentration. When she stopped talking, he gave her a light clap on the shoulder.

"Good call," Harry heard him say. "Don't know how I've done without you all summer."

Cho didn't seem to notice that Charlie's neck was pink when he said this; she thanked him, turned back to the map, and studiously trailed her wand across certain areas as if memorizing them. But Harry, who had a lot of experience watching Ron go red, narrowed his eyes at Charlie and wondered what was happening there.

Malfoy looked somewhat unnerved by his trainer, a blonde woman called Lisa, which Harry found amusing considering that she was a good six inches shorter than he was. Harry could hear her talking very quickly about breakaway harnesses and wildly waving her hands about to demonstrate while Draco leaned back to avoid getting hit. On the other hand, Viktor and his trainer, Andras, seemed to get on well. Andras also had a thick accent, but it seemed to help their communication, rather than hinder it.

"Yes," Viktor was saying. "I am vell-schooled in Vind Charms."

"Good," Andras grunted. "You vill need them to keep dragon fire from flying back into your face as you ride."

Harry swallowed, and tried to concentrate on something other than the vision he'd just had of a giant cloud of orange fire flying towards his head. It was good that they weren't riding today, he thought. He'd had enough, really. It would take all night to get used to the idea of all this gear—not to mention Malfoy's presence. Better, really, to wait until tomorrow to throw dragons into the mix.

"Everyone!" Charlie clapped his hands. "Oil!" He pointed his wand to a spot on the map, and a section of shoreline glowed blue. "This is where the dragons are kept. Mind you don't Apparate right into the enclosure." He grinned. "See you outside it." He Disapparated, with Mick and Cho close behind him. One by one, the other riders left the room, until Harry and Burke were the only ones left.

"Ready to meet your new partner?" Burke asked, slipping on a pair of fireproof goggles and handing a pair to Harry. "You'll want these."

Harry did want them—he would have liked to encase the whole of himself in a fireproof bubble, actually—but he accepted the goggles without a word and Disapparated after Burke.

The Scottish shoreline was wide and cold. Harry shivered and looked around nervously, hoping

he hadn't Apparated right between a pair of giant beasts.

"Harry," Charlie said, approaching him, "you first. Come on with me. Entrance is this way."

It was invisible—Rose Brown had told them about the Diversion Enchantments, but Harry was stunned to see how perfectly they worked. Charlie walked him between two standing stones, through which there appeared to be nothing but cliffs and sky. The moment Harry passed between them, however, he gasped and took a giant step back.

Dragons. They were Stunned in their enclosures, but they were still massive and frightening; Harry had an unhappy sensation that he remembered from his fourth year, of being nothing more than a bit of toast to these creatures. Huge snorts of smoke came out of their wide nostrils and their wings curled and uncurled slightly as they breathed. The tips of their fangs showed. Their talons gleamed. And these were the "tame" ones.

There were keepers all over the place, too—running about and floating food in the air in front of them—enormous carcasses, which they dropped into even bigger troughs. Harry grimaced when blood slopped out of one. He was smaller than the meal that the dragon had just been served.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" Charlie breathed, sounding more like Hagrid than ever. He sighed happily and folded his arms. "Glad you've decided to give them a chance, Harry. You won't be sorry. They're the most fantastic beasts on earth, dragons. Wait till you've got one under you—there's nothing like it."

Harry agreed that there probably wasn't, and Charlie walked him between the sleeping giants, pointing them out and calling them by name. They passed one that wasn't a Welsh Green, and Harry gaped at it.

"That's a Chinese Fireball," he said slowly. "But..."

Charlie rolled his eyes. "Ruddy Malfoy's too *good* for a regular flight dragon," he hissed under his breath. "Had that one brought from *home*. Calls it Mordor. Bet it served in the Dark army." Charlie glared at the dragon, which snored and shot two tiny, mushroom-shaped balls of smoke out of its nose. "I love Fireballs, but that one's going to cause trouble, I can feel it. Still, we had to let Malfoy come when he offered, and this was his stipulation. 'I want *my* dragon!' Spoiled little—" Charlie called Malfoy several names, all of which Harry agreed to, then led him to the last huge stable. "Here's yours," he said, pointing to the motionless mountain of an animal. "Recognize him?"

Harry narrowed his eyes. This dragon wasn't a Welsh Green, either. "I thought you said only the Common Welsh were trained," he protested. "Why are you giving me this one?"

"Look close." Charlie smiled. "Bet he'll recognize you, when he wakes up—smart beasts, they are. Remember scents for years. Had him since he was a baby—usually this type's monstrous, they'll even feed on other dragons—but he's the tamest of all our crew."

Harry gave Charlie an incredulous stare. "Feed on... other dragons?" he asked, his voice breaking. He looked warily at the jet-black ridges on the dragon's back, its lizard-like expanse of skin, and its sharp, shining bronze horns. "What kind of dragon is it?" he asked, gulping in fear as Charlie stepped up to the Stunned beast and patted him gently on the side of his snout. But he yanked his gloved hand away when the dragon burped in sleep, sending a burst of fire at Harry, who yelped and jumped back.

"He's a Norwegian Ridgeback," Charlie answered cheerfully, giving the dragon a fond look. "Aren't you, Norbert?"

* * * * *

The Court of Magic in Diagon Alley had always seemed like an enormous playground to Ron when he was very small. He could remember visiting his father at the Ministry, and then rushing ahead of his mother to the courthouse's wide stone steps. The courthouse sat adjacent to the main Ministry building, at the foot of a grassy lawn. He and Ginny would rush to the top of the steps (there were eighty-seven or eighty-eight, depending on how you decided to count), and after resting for a moment at the top, take turns seeing how far they could run up the sloping columns. Then you could actually lie down on one of the wide steps, and, if you turned your head at just the right angle, look across to the Ministry and feel as though the enormous building went up into the sky forever. The Ministry was a complicated jumble of triangular additions and protruding turrets and Ron used to like to pretend that he could tell behind which windows rested the Department of Mysteries, and the Magical Law Enforcement Squad. Eventually, he would slide off of the steps and join his brothers in trying to jump into one of the white, giant-sized stone scales which balanced in midair over the courthouse lawn.

He had never actually had reason to go inside the courthouse until today, and as he followed Sirius up the steps, which somehow seemed to be much more normal-sized than they had when he was five years old, he felt a knot form in his stomach. They were stopped at the door by two security

wizards, who let Sirius enter with a nod. Sirius waited patiently as Ron turned over his wand for inspection and allowed a restriction spell to be placed on it. A gold badge, stamped with "VISITOR" in blinking red letters, appeared on his robes, and finally, the guards waved him into the building.

"Wow," said Ron, following Sirius into the depths of the building, "what are they worried about?"

"Everything," Sirius answered, waving his wand over a plain wooden door. "You can't be too careful. We still don't have a firm idea of who might be lurking around outside of Culparrat." He mumbled a spell, sparks flew out of his wand, and then he gently pushed the door open. "Welcome to my office—one of them, at least."

Ron let out a snort when he stepped over the threshold and saw an office after his own heart. Sirius had only been in residence since the beginning of the summer, but already there were filing cabinets overflowing with paper, stacks of parchment on the floor, and numerous bunches of documents nailed to the walls. It was in stark contrast to the neat, yet cozy, library at Lupin Lodge.

"Has Remus seen this office?" he asked, gingerly stepping over a pile of law books and lifting a stack of paper so that he could sit down.

"Yes," Sirius answered, adding a stack of files to an already teetering pile on top of a file cabinet and then sitting down across from Ron. "That's why he prefers to help me from home."

"I thought he wasn't allowed to come—" Ron began, but stopped in mid-sentence when Sirius clenched his jaw, and picked up one of the law books from the floor: *Can You Handle the Truth?* by Nicholson Moore, authority on wizard law. Beneath it were several history books, and several volumes of the *Annotated Code of Wizard Regulations*. It occurred to Ron that he didn't know much about Sirius's career before Azkaban. "Were you into all of this legal stuff before?" he asked. He was still never sure if he should refer to Sirius's time in prison— it seemed like the kind of remark that would make Hermione nudge him in the ribs and say "Shhhhhh!"

Sirius shrugged. "I'd thought about it. I was much more interested in riding my motorbike and working for the Order. But law was always a hobby. I had to know how much trouble I was technically *allowed* to get into." He laughed—such a rare sight that Ron stared in disbelief. "I had to know exactly how far I could push James without the Head Boy being able to turn me in."

Ron laughed too, and it was the first real laugh he'd had since Hermione had left. "Yeah, well, I can understand that. It's also very important for the Head Boy to know all the rules. Did you know, for example, that *nowhere* in any of the Hogwarts handbooks does it specifically say that students are not allowed in the kitchens?"

"Ahhh," Sirius answered, leaning back in his chair and raising a finger, "but it does. It says—" he closed his eyes in concentration "— No student shall remove food from the kitchens..."

"Exactly!" Ron interrupted. "It does *not* say that you can't go *into* the kitchens. It does *not* say that the house-elves can't carry it out of the kitchen for you at any time, although Hermione did always put them off by trying to pay them. It merely says that a *student* cannot remove food from the kitchens. You can also go down to the kitchens and eat the food *there*. Whoever wrote that handbook was an idiot, although I'm not complaining."

There was a knock at the door, and Sirius pointed his wand at the knob and opened it without rising from his chair. An eagle swooped in, carrying an enormous parcel. Ron had never seen an eagle up close and leaned forward to get a better look, but the bird dropped the parcel in Sirius's lap and turned to leave, hitting the side of Ron's head with his wing as he flew out the door.

"Ow!" Ron yelled, rubbing his ear. Sirius's face had returned to its usual grim, stony expression. He was reaching over his desk and pulling papers out, left and right.

"Thought you might want to see this," he said, handing the bunch to Ron. "I keep meaning to bring these home for you, but then I get preoccupied."

There were several pieces of parchment, on which were scrawled hasty-looking notes. The top of the pile said "Malfoy/Weasley Case" in bold, official-looking letters. "Ah," said Ron, feeling his good mood dissipate. There was something sick about seeing his name that close to Malfoy's. Sirius had risen from his chair, and was now bent over, digging through a pile on the floor. Ron looked back down at the files. Sirius had written things all over the margins. Things like 'Quine and MacMillan testimony', and 'report from Dr. Buckey at St. Mungo's indicates that slimy git was *not* badly injured.' Ron choked back a laugh at that one. Attached to the St. Mungo's report were several photographs. Ron watched in amusement as Malfoy, in St. Mungo's blue and white striped hospital robes, climbed out of his bed, shared a joke with his mother (Ron was amazed to see that she could actually smile), and did a series of push-ups on the floor.

"Interesting," said Ron. He was starting to feel better. If Malfoy was acting like this, then there was no way that anyone would believe that Ron's punch had caused permanent damage. Although, he thought to himself, Malfoy did look rather idiotic exercising in those robes.

Sirius glanced over at Ron and then down to the photographs. "Yeah," he said. "I don't think you

need to worry about anything. That *Daily Prophet* reporter, Creevey? He gave them to me yesterday. Seems to dislike Malfoy as much as you do."

"So," asked Ron, hesitantly. "Do you think people will believe this stuff? I mean, the judges and everything, they're fair?"

"You'll see today, won't you? This is a slightly different trial than the one you're up against. Much more serious, after all, it's a Death Eater case. As for yours, I've tried to get Malfoy's defender to realize that it would be much easier to drop this whole thing, but, of course, he can't do that unless he persuades Malfoy, and that git seems to have it in for you. Still, I'm hoping all you've got in store is a monetary fine."

"Hoping?" Ron repeated uneasily.

"Perhaps community service. At worst—I won't lie to you—at worst, I can see a short jail sentence, if the jury decides to overcompensate on grounds that you're the Minister's son and they don't want to be seen as showing favoritism. You could get held in one of the lower security Ministry dungeons—but nothing serious, not like wizard prison." Sirius winced as he said this, and breathed heavily through his nose. "They *want* to get you in prison, of course, but 'Assault with the Intent to cause Grievous Bodily Harm'? They have to know that's ridiculous."

"Well, I'd like to kill him now," Ron mumbled, wondering what a "short" jail sentence was. He couldn't imagine what he'd do, if that happened.

Sirius raised his eyebrows. "Watch what you say, Ron. Not here, but in public. Especially because of your father—someone will always hear you."

Ron shrugged, and balanced the pile on top of some other files on the desk, thinking that being well known wasn't as much fun as he'd once hoped it would be. He didn't want to think about Malfoy any more. *It'll be okay*, he told himself.

"Are those for today?" he asked, trying to change the subject. He pointed to a group of papers that Sirius had fanned out on the floor in front of him.

"Mm-hmm," Sirius answered, not looking up. He pushed aside some brightly-covered pamphlets that looked like junk mail—*Loopholes in the Law: How to Get Anyone Off on a Technicality* and *It Pays to Get Injured!*—and handed an enormous law book to Ron. "Look up 'Mens Rea', would you?"

"Sure," said Ron, grunting as he picked up the heavy book. Hermione had to have arms of steel, after hefting volumes like this one around for seven years. "*The Encyclopedia of Wizard Law*," he murmured, and then flipped through the pages, which were so thin that he could see the outline of his hand through the paper. There must have been a thousand entries under 'M', but eventually he found the correct one. Ron cleared his throat and read, "'Mens Rea' means 'guilty mind'. Conviction for certain crimes require that the defendant intended to carry out the crime; in such cases the prosecution must prove that there was mens rea at the time the offense was committed."

"Hmph," snorted Sirius, tapping a quill absentmindedly on the palm of his hand, "that still won't help." He yawned and continued to mumble quietly, as if Ron weren't in the room. "'Guilty mind'—but, how can we really know the truth if—DAMN!" Ron jumped as Sirius slammed a fist down on the desk. Parchment flew everywhere, and from the state of the office, Ron figured that Sirius probably did that all the time.

"Sirius," Ron said, perplexed, "why don't you just check and see if they've got Dark Marks?"

"Voldemort alone could make those visible. At least, that's what we've determined so far—no one else seems to have the magic. Anyway, not everyone affiliated with Death Eating was an official member of the group."

"Then why can't you just administer Veritaserum to these people? It'd tell you immediately who's telling the truth."

Sirius shook his head. "I wish it were that simple." He rose from his chair and leaned against the large filing cabinet. "The Death Eaters made liberal use of the Imperius Curse, among other things."

Ron shuddered, flashing unwillingly back to an extended, unshakable, floating feeling, and the sound of soft laughter all around him—Death Eaters interrogating him, wiping away his loyalties and forcing him to compromise the people that he loved. There were few things worse than the Imperius Curse. The pain of the Cruciatus haunted him far less. "So just ask the defendant to tell you if they were being controlled," Ron said, burying his thoughts again. "If they're under Veritaserum, they'd have to tell you, right?"

Sirius leaned forward. "Say, for example, I put you under the Imperius Curse right now and made you ... bark like a dog." Sirius grinned, and Ron gave a weak smile. "If I then administered Veritaserum and asked you what you'd just been doing, you'd tell me that you'd been barking like a dog. It's the truth. But you weren't doing it of your own free will, were you?"

"I still don't understand. You should just ask me if I was under the Imperius Curse."

"Would you know?"

Ron laughed softly. "Oh, I'd know."

"You'd think so," Sirius agreed, "but it's common practice for Death Eaters to lay a Memory Charm on top of the Imperius, in case a useful captive should be rescued, or escape. And breaking a Memory Charm can ruin an otherwise sound mind."

"Bertha Jorkins," Ron muttered.

"Right. This makes it nearly impossible to depend on an individual's own testimony in defending their case. If they're innocent, then they can still say things that would sound horrendous, yet have no memory of having been placed under the Imperius Curse. On the flip side, anyone can lie and say that they were being manipulated. We *have* to look to witnesses and other outside evidence. We have to look at a history of behavior—incidents before the rise of Voldemort have to be taken into account. And then it gets circumstantial, and that's more of a nightmare."

Ron furrowed his brow. This was all very complicated. "Don't you always have witnesses?"

Sirius sighed. "We do, but they're not faultless, are they? There were dozens of witnesses who saw me kill Peter."

It occurred to Ron that he knew next to nothing about how the Wizard court worked. "So," he asked, trying not to sound stupid, "that's what you do then? You try to defend all the supposed Death Eaters and gather as much evidence as you can to give them a fair trial?"

Gathering a bunch of papers in his arms, Sirius rose from his chair. "I'll explain as we walk down to the courtroom—we're going to be late."

Ron had to walk quickly to keep up with Sirius, who seemed to be trying to get his legs to catch up with his head—he walked with a determination that kept his whole upper body thrust forward. "We had to restructure the system after the war," he explained, "precisely because of people like *this*." He patted his papers with one hand. "Your trial with Malfoy will be more traditional, with a judge, and defenders, and a jury. But the Death Eater trials are conducted differently. There's not one judge, but three in every trial. We call them the Judicial Council—today we've got Mundungus Fletcher, Viviane Simpson, and Joseph Zug.

"How did you choose them?" Ron asked.

"They're all appointed by your father."

Ron blinked. It still surprised him to hear about the things that his father did as the Minister of Magic. It seemed so far removed from the Dad he knew at home. His chest swelled with a bit of Weasley pride.

"And then what do you do?" Ron hoped he wasn't annoying Sirius with his questions.

"Whatever I have to," Sirius answered, turning a corner without losing speed. "It's my job to gather the information, witnesses, and all the other stuff, and try to separate fact from fiction. There *is* a jury, but they really serve only as an advisory board. They can't make the final decisions, only the Judicial Council can do that."

"And you defend every case?" Ron knew that Sirius had been working himself too hard, and now he understood why.

"Wish I could," said Sirius, stopping outside a set of enormous stone double doors. "The best I can do is look over every case and decide who handles it. But I make sure to take every case that has a high potential for being unfairly and prematurely judged. I take the guiltiest-seeming prisoners." Sirius smiled grimly.

Ron nodded, thinking that taking all the guiltiest-seeming prisoners didn't really lighten Sirius's workload. Most Death Eaters seemed pretty guilty, to him. "And you just do whatever you can to figure out the truth."

"Yes. The woman we're trying today—Darla Courtenay—she was a defender by profession. She was a Ravenclaw when she was at Hogwarts and very respectable throughout her career. She actually worked for the Ministry. But about ninety percent of the people that she defended during the war turned out to be Death Eaters, and I have no idea if she's innocent, or if she helped to facilitate their crimes."

Waving his wand, Sirius opened the doors, and Ron's mouth fell open when he recognized the grand main courtroom from his history books. It was intimidating. A few witches and wizards were seated in the spectators' gallery that surrounded the room, and Ron recognized Mundungus Fletcher sitting at the front, deep in consultation with the other two members of the Council.

"Nice of you to join us, Mr. Black!" Mundungus yelled, not looking up from his desk. Sirius made a rude gesture in the direction of the Council, and then showed Ron how to get to the spectators' gallery. "See you at lunch," he said. "I can guarantee you that this trial will take that long, at least."

Ron climbed the stairs and found a seat where he could have a good view of the prisoner's face,

and of Sirius. The room was cold and dim, and Ron felt a bit like he was back in one of Snape's Potions lessons. He looked across the room at the jury. There was a mix of young and old witches and wizards. He recognized his mother's school friend, Mrs. Cheshire—he'd forgotten to ask Sirius how the jury was selected. He wondered if Mrs. Cheshire could be on his jury? With his luck these days, he'd get Millicent Bulstrode.

A loud voice that echoed throughout the room startled Ron out of his thoughts. "PLEASE RISE FOR THE MINISTER OF MAGIC!" said a squeaky voice that seemed to come from the ceiling. Ron looked up, but couldn't see anyone. It sounded like a house-elf. Ron was surprised to see his father enter the room from behind the Council; he wondered how his father had time to come to trials every day, with all the other things that a Minister of Magic must have to do. Arthur was wearing fancy purple robes and a very ornate, pointy wizard hat that winked with stars, and Ron snickered, despite himself. His dad was starting to go daft about dressing, just like Dumbledore.

Sirius walked up to Arthur and handed him a piece of paper, and Ron saw his father point his wand at his throat. "On this day, let it be said, for the record, that the Ministry of Magic calls to trial one Darla Courtenay, under charges of conspiring against the forces of good and of acting as an accomplice to the Dark wizard, Voldemort." Several of the people sitting near Ron gasped at the mention of Voldemort's name. Arthur then said, "The Minister of Magic defers to the judgment of the Judicial Council," and turned and left the room.

There was silence in the room except for the shuffling of some papers and then, a creaking noise as one of the side doors to the courtroom opened. Two young Aurors-in-training floated the limp body of a woman to the chair in the middle of the room and strapped her in. After they made sure that she was secure, Sirius pointed his wand at her and said '*Ennervate*'. When she awoke, she seemed unaware and disoriented, but a moment later, she opened her mouth and started screaming.

"Ms. Courtenay! You *must* calm down." Sirius's voice was surprisingly calm, but his eyes burned intensely and his wand was pointed at the prisoner.

The woman stopped screaming, but she was anything but calm. She tried to draw herself as straight as she could in the chair, and looked around as if expecting to be struck dead at any moment. Ron realized that she'd probably been Stunned for a long while, although someone must have awoken her at some point to let her know about her trial.

The Judicial Council explained the procedures and the charges in detail. "I know all of this," she interrupted, her voice shaking, "it's already been explained to me."

Then Sirius began asking Darla questions. They started out simply.

"Were you ever a Death Eater?"

"Like you, you mean?"

Sirius went white with anger, and Fletcher stood up behind him. "Mr. Black was pardoned by this Ministry in the autumn of 1997," he barked. "You were Stunned in the spring of 1998, so don't pretend ignorance, young woman. Now answer the question."

Ron wondered how often people did that, to Sirius.

"No," Darla spat. "I was never a Death Eater."

"Were you ever in the service of Lord Voldemort?"

"No."

"Did you ever knowingly let a guilty man walk free?"

"My job was to defend people."

This went on for quite a while, and Ron began to wonder if Darla Courtenay was telling the truth. He tried to guess if she was guilty just by looking at her, but he really didn't have a clue. She looked normal enough—Ron could tell she was attractive, even though her hair was pulled back and her robes torn. She looked a little bit angry, and that made Ron suspicious, although he supposed he'd be angry as well. He leaned forward in his seat and strained to hear every word.

The questions became more specific.

"Were you aware, Ms. Courtenay, that Gavin Fannon went on to kill seven people in the service of Lord Voldemort, a mere two months after you fought for his innocence?"

"I am a defender, Mr. Black. I defend people, which is more than I can say for you. You seem determined to prove that I'm guilty. I did my job—it wasn't my fault that some of my clients didn't tell me everything. At least I spoke to my clients before letting them go into a courtroom." She paused, and sat as far forward as she could in her chair, pointing a finger at Sirius. "Maybe you should spend more time trying to prove my innocence, and less trying to prove my guilt. I don't have a guilty conscience and you'd better make sure that you don't act in a manner so as to place guilt on your own head, Mr. Black."

There was complete silence in the courtroom. Ron could hear himself breathing; he was on the edge of his seat, hands clenched together. He had no idea what Sirius would say, how he would react. This was like watching a game of chess for the very first time.

When Sirius finally did speak, his voice was very even. "I would like to call in our first witness—Clifford Parkinson."

Darla looked angry enough to break her chains without a wand. The guards floated in Clifford Parkinson, a tall, skinny man with a pug nose, already chained to a chair. When revived, he looked around in frightened befuddlement, and when he saw Darla his confusion seemed to grow.

The charges against Parkinson were fairly clear-cut. Sirius explained to everyone that Parkinson had been arrested during the war as one of the ringleaders in what had been known as the "Bonfire Night" incident. He and a friend had killed two Muggles by using a Switching Spell. The spell had placed the Muggles on the bonfire during Guy Fawke's Night in place of the straw man that usually burned on the bonfire. Darla had been his defender and he had been released due to lack of evidence.

Sirius then turned to Parkinson and asked, "Mr. Parkinson, where were you the evening of November 5, 1996?"

Parkinson's voice was quite high-pitched. "I was at home."

"Were you?" asked Sirius, pacing. "Then how is it that you were arrested by members of the M.L.E.S. in Skipton, when your home, as I understand it, is in Birmingham?"

"I've already had a trial, Black," spat Parkinson. He pointed at Darla. "She knows! She was my defender."

"Mmmmm," said Sirius. He turned to address Darla. "Did he tell you that he was at home that evening? Did he explain to you how he ended up so far from home?"

"My job," said Darla, through gritted teeth, "was to defend my client. I was not on some sort of witch hunt. You—" she nodded her head toward Sirius, and then at the Judicial Council. "- you're no better than the Muggles. You're just out for blood."

Sirius stared at her for what seemed like an eternity to Ron. He couldn't help but remember the night that Sirius had dragged him through the Whomping Willow and into the Shrieking Shack during his third year at Hogwarts. Sirius had transformed from a dog into a human and he and Ron had just *looked* at each other. Ron had been on the receiving end of that stare, and he didn't envy Darla Courtenay one bit.

* * * * *

Ginny sat cross-legged in her chair at the dinner table, ignoring her plate. For two days she had been utterly absorbed with *Empathy in Sorcery: A Complete History and Guide*, which now sat open in her lap. She devoured each word, her body still tingling from the effort of her first lesson in Healing. She'd spent the last three hours holding her palms over various plants in the back garden and recording what she'd sensed. The lesson had left her hungry and tired, but she was too geared up to notice. It had *worked*. She had felt things.

"Ginny," Remus said gently, "take a break."

She nodded absently and groped for her fork without looking up. "I'll eat, I'll eat," she murmured, and stabbed something on her plate. Keeping her eyes on her book, she brought the food to her mouth, hardly even tasting it.

The period which directly follows a Healer's discovery of his or her gift,

she read,

is generally a time of great energy and relief. Nebulous, yet overwhelming feelings which have always plagued the Healer finally have a name. Sensations which have been written off as "hypersensitivity" or "over imagination" are finally justified as real. A novice Healer may spend much of this discovery period in a state of incredible happiness; suddenly there is nothing "wrong" or "odd" about the extreme depth of feeling that he or she has always possessed. On the contrary, that depth is now recognized as a rare and useful tool, ready to be sharpened and exercised.

Ginny chewed slowly on the Brussels sprout she had inadvertently stuck in her mouth. She hated the things, but was too rapt to bother spitting it out. She grimaced, and swallowed.

The recommended first subject of study for any Healer in training is not a fellow human being—though this will be most Healers' natural inclination. The newfound ability to help

others must be resisted until the Healer has truly mastered his or her gift. New Healers should always begin work in the vegetable kingdom; plants are excellent practice targets and provide an enormous variety of auras on which Healers can hone their skills. This study ties into the study of Potions, at which Healers may find themselves suddenly and strangely skilled. Herbology and Potions, therefore, should comprise at least the first six months of Healer education.

Ginny frowned in disappointment. The feelings she had experienced while working with the plants had been thrilling—some good, some bad, but certainly thrilling—yet they had not been satisfying. She had harbored such an urge, the whole time, to put her hands near Remus and see what she could feel. She had an idea that she would know more about him, and about the werewolf, if she could only get him to stand still long enough.

“Six months on plants?” she muttered, turning the pages back quickly to see what the next course of study would be. Several chapters later she saw the title *Care of Magical Creatures: The Second Tier of Study* and groaned. “And then animals? I want to do *people*.”

There was a clink of metal on flatware, then a pause as Remus swallowed and cleared his throat. “Of course,” he said. “But you don’t want to do damage to anyone—or to yourself. You said that some of the unhealthy trees made you ache, and that’s to be expected, but you’re going to have to build up a tolerance to other people’s pain. It will serve you best to practice in degrees, starting with living things whose injuries and emotions are less complicated.”

Ginny pursed her lips at this answer, which was not the one she wanted, and stubbornly continued to read. Suddenly she understood how Hermione could always complete a long course of study in half the time that it would take any other student; Ginny knew in her bones that she would be ready to take on complex animals well before six months had passed. But she kept quiet, letting her eyes scan the page. The faster she learned, the faster she could convince Remus to let her move ahead.

A loud *slam!* of something hitting the floor and the scrape of two chairs being pulled back broke Ginny’s concentration, and when someone nudged her in the side with an elbow, she elbowed back, quite hard. “Stop it, Ron,” she complained. “I’m trying to study.”

“How was your day, Ron?” Ron asked himself in a girlish voice, affecting a tone of great concern. “Did you learn much at court? Worried about your trial? Sorry to pester you, but as your only sister, I care about your life.”

A weary laugh from across the table told Ginny that Sirius had just Apparated home as well, but she ignored him, too. She wanted to read.

“Rude,” Ron said, yanking at one side of her book. “You’re not supposed to read at the table.”

Ginny yanked back, and finally looked up to glare at her brother. “Who are you—Mum? Let go!”

Ron grinned and let go, but Ginny couldn’t help noticing that the smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. He looked troubled. He... *felt* troubled. Ginny was startled to realize that she could keenly feel his tension, with hardly any effort at all. She wondered if it had something to do with being related to him, and made a mental note to look that up. “Are you okay?” she asked, shutting her book and setting it on the table. Maybe he would let her practice on him. She concentrated as hard as she could on the energy that emanated from her brother, opening herself to it and attempting to work out what it was. She noticed, out of the corner of her eye, that Remus was watching her and frowning, but she pretended not to see him. “What’s the matter?” she prodded, focusing on Ron.

Ron rolled his eyes. “Oh don’t try asking now. You missed your chance.”

“Really, are you—”

“I’m fine.”

But he wasn’t. He turned his eyes to the plate that Sirius had just flown over to him, mumbled his thanks, and started eating. Ginny glanced at Sirius, who was watching Ron with an eyebrow raised. She wondered what they had seen in court. Perhaps witnessing a trial had been a bad idea—perhaps it had made Ron more, not less, nervous about Malfoy’s case against him.

“Who was it today?” Remus asked in a low voice, as Sirius served himself.

“Courtenay,” Sirius answered. He took a huge bite of chicken, and shook his head. “She’s guilty,” he said thickly, “and I can’t find a way to prove it. There’s a way, but I’m not... I know it’s *right* there, but I’m missing it.”

“You’re tired,” Remus answered. “If you got some sleep—”

“Can’t afford more sleep,” Sirius said irritably. “Ron, if you learned anything today, it should’ve made you feel much better. It’s harder than hell to fairly convict anyone of anything.”

Ron didn’t answer. His face was set in grim lines, and he continued to concentrate on his food.

Ginny elbowed him a little. “Ron,” she tried, but she snatched her arm away when his face

darkened.

"Don't bother me right now," he snapped.

She shot him a look. It was fine if *he* wanted to Apparate to the table with a big bang and interrupt her reading, but when *she* wanted to talk... Ginny sniffed. Brothers were so obnoxious.

"Where's Harry?" Sirius asked. "He's not back?"

Ginny forgot Ron's sudden change of mood and checked her watch. It was quarter-past six. Harry was supposed to have been finished with the dragons at six. He should have Apparated home from Azkaban by now. She couldn't believe it had taken her so long to notice.

"Not yet," Remus answered.

"What's taking him so long?" Sirius demanded of no one in particular.

Ginny was glad that someone else was appropriately worried; she caught Sirius's eyes and shook her head. "I don't know," she said.

"Should I go up and see if he—"

"Sirius. It's only been fifteen minutes. I imagine the dragon riders must have to wear protective robes, or gear of some kind—give Harry a chance to gather himself. I'm sure he's fine."

Ginny and Sirius exchanged a look, but didn't protest. Sirius continued to eat. Ginny picked up her fork again, but worry and hunger clashed in her stomach and she couldn't make herself take a bite. While the other three silently ate their dinners, Ginny grew progressively more anxious, continuing to check her watch under the table until—

"SIRIUS!"

Ginny jumped and gasped. "Ron, scare everyone to death why don't you!"

Ron was halfway out of his chair, leaning across the table, suddenly and highly agitated. "That woman—Courtenay—she was a Ministry employee, right?"

Sirius looked almost annoyed. "Weren't you listening today? She was a defender."

Ron waved an impatient hand. He started to rap his fingers on the table. "There are files at the Ministry about each case that went through the Office of the Defender, right? I mean, that's where you found all that information about Parkinson, right? There's a big file about his arrest and the trial where she defended him, right?"

Ginny looked over at Sirius, who was chewing his pasty and looking disinterested.

"Do you know who brought him in? I mean, who in the M.L.E.S. arrested him? Is that in the files?"

"Yes, it's all there."

"Could we find out who was responsible for arresting other known Death Eaters and assigning Darla as their defender?"

Sirius dropped his pasty into his plate; it landed with a thud. "What are you saying, Ron?" he asked slowly.

"What if she *is* innocent, Sirius? What if she was being set up—controlled by her clients, one curse at a time? What if the person who orchestrated it works for the M.L.E.S.? Or in the Office of the Defender?"

"I don't know." Sirius looked as if he didn't want to believe Ron. "They've all been checked. All of them. It's a highly secure operation."

Ginny stole a glance at Remus, who was quite pale. He reached out and touched Sirius on the forearm. "I think you should listen to him," Remus said quietly. "He's right. It's the perfect bluff."

There was a moment of silence. Ginny closed her eyes and could feel three distinct energy forces surrounding her—one excited, one worried, and one extremely frightened. The table shook as someone pushed away from it.

Sirius was on his feet. "I knew the solution was right in front of me," he muttered, pulling his wand. Remus made a grab for the wand, but Sirius jerked away. "No, I know, I need sleep, but this is too important—I have to get this researched before we reconvene."

"Wait a second." Ron stood as well. "I don't have to work until five tomorrow night, I don't need sleep—I'll go."

Sirius shook his head. "You won't have access to everything I need, and I'll have to read over the—"

"Damn it, Sirius." Remus's protest was very quiet, but so intense that everyone stopped talking and looked at him. He very rarely swore, and Ginny felt a thrill at the dark look in his light eyes as he pinned Sirius with them. "Let Ron help if he wants to. You need it, and I *can't*." There was something desperate in his voice.

Sirius's jaw tightened. He looked at Remus for a quiet moment, then gave a terse nod. "Ready,

Ron?"

Ginny glanced at her brother; there were pink patches in his cheeks and his eyes were bright. He looked... proud. "Right," Ron said, pulling his wand. "Do I need to bring anything?"

But before Sirius could answer, everyone at the table went still and looked up. Someone was walking around upstairs. Bed springs creaked, and there were two soft thuds, like the sound of shoes dropping to the floor. Ginny's heart swelled with relief. Harry hadn't been torched by one of Charlie's stupid dragons. He was home.

"We'll leave in a second," Sirius muttered. "I want to see how he is." He went towards the kitchen door and Ron followed.

But Ginny pushed her chair back and darted in front of both of them; she raced through the front room to the stairs, and heard Remus's voice behind her; "Let them alone. You two should get started if you're going tonight." Ginny silently thanked Remus, made a quick vow to herself that she would never turn in her homework late, and knocked on Harry's door.

"Harry? Is that you?"

"Yeah. Come in."

Ginny pushed the door open and smiled so widely at Harry that she felt a little stupid, but she couldn't help it. The fear that he would get into danger and disappear had never quite worn off, and somehow, Ginny knew it never would. "You're okay," she said, still smiling, and he smiled back from his seat on the bed. His shoulders were a little slumped, and he looked tired, but otherwise there didn't seem to be any injuries. A three-dimensional map hung suspended in midair in front of him. "What was it like?" she asked, peering at it curiously. "Or are you too tired to talk?"

"No." Harry shifted sideways and touched the spot next to him, coloring as he did so.

Ginny walked around the map and sat beside him, blushing in answer. He wanted her there. He wanted her close. Their sides brushed and Ginny's thigh rested against Harry's, but for the first time, she felt no awkwardness. Harry picked up her hand and pushed his fingers between hers, and they were quiet together for several minutes; Ginny felt as if the chaos of dinner and the strange burden of Empathy were falling away from her, like giant stones tumbling down a hill. She watched the map—which she could now see was of Azkaban—letting her eyes follow the little Dementors as they slithered in and out of gaps in the walls. They looked like toys. She reached out her free hand and flicked at one, but her fingers passed right through the illusion.

"How was school?" Harry finally asked. He pointed his wand, and the map rolled up and flew into his bag.

"Fine." Ginny thought about telling Harry what she was learning, but found she didn't want to. She hadn't discussed Empathy with anyone other than Remus. "How were things at Azkaban?"

Harry gave a short laugh. "I don't know what I was thinking, taking this job."

"I told you," Ginny said, leaning her head on Harry's shoulder. "Are the dragons as big as you remember them?"

Harry snorted. "Bigger. But you won't believe which one I'm riding."

Ginny pulled her legs onto the bed and tucked them to the side, nestling more closely against Harry. "Which one?"

"Did you ever know about Norbert?"

Ginny gasped. "Hagrid's Norbert?" She lifted her head and stared at Harry. "Of course I knew about him, Ron told me everything about your first year. Really—he's yours? But he's not a Welsh Green!"

"Norwegian Ridgeback."

"Those are the kind that attack each other! Is he honestly tame enough to ride?" Ginny asked anxiously. "Are you sure?"

Harry nodded and switched her hand into his left one. Ginny shut her eyes, trying not to burst as Harry slipped his right arm around her and pulled her a bit closer. She let her head fall against his shoulder once more, and tucked her knees up a little tighter so that they overlapped with his leg. Their clasped hands rested on her knee, and Harry's fingers traveled up and down the outside of her other arm, making her shiver. "How many riders are there?" she asked quietly, when she found her voice again.

"Nine. Three on my shift."

"Just three of you? Is that safe?" Ginny felt Harry's shoulders shake with silent laughter.

"I don't know. None of it's safe, I guess."

"Well, who are you riding with? Charlie and Mick?"

"No." Harry shifted, and Ginny thought she could feel his body tense. He was uncomfortable. She squeezed his hand and waited. "Viktor Krum's one of my... I don't know, colleagues?" Harry

laughed through his nose.

Ginny turned her head in surprise, then blushed to realize how close her mouth was to Harry's face. She did not, however, pull away. "Viktor Krum?" she repeated, feeling her voice reverberate between her mouth and his jaw. She felt a rush of power when Harry closed his eyes and his mouth fell slightly open. "Viktor *Seeker* Krum?"

"Yeah." Harry brought his face a fraction closer to hers, as if waiting for her to speak again.

"He's giving up Quidditch to do this?"

"Guess so."

"So you're not the only idiot, then."

"Guess not."

Ginny laughed, and affectionately touched her lips to Harry's cheek. He squeezed her arm and rested his head against hers. This was so natural. *This* was what she'd always known it would be like. "I'm glad you have a friend up there," she murmured. "Who's the other rider?"

Harry tensed again, and Ginny felt a stab of apprehension. He muttered something she couldn't understand.

"Huh? I can't hear you."

"Draco Malfoy." Harry was gripping her hand rather too hard. "He's the other one on my shift."

Ginny didn't move. She wasn't sure what she wanted to do first—scream, hit something, or get another Howler ready. "You're joking," she said hopefully.

"I'm not." Harry sounded resigned. "He got a letter because he was practicing with the Falcons, and I guess he doesn't much want to play Quidditch either."

"Why?" Ginny sat up in despair and looked at Harry. "When has he *ever* done something difficult on purpose? Why would he pick dragon riding if he could buy himself a spot on the Falcons?"

"I don't know." Harry let go of Ginny's hand and pushed his glasses up on his nose.

"What-bothering Ron isn't good enough? Does he *have* to follow you everywhere? Can't you tell him to go and—oh, I don't know. Never mind. I'll tell Dad to sack him."

Harry laughed, but the sound was weary. "You can't. No one else wants the job—Charlie says that's the only reason they took him in the first place. I just can't figure out why he wants to *be* there." Harry scratched his head. "It's going to be hard work. We didn't ride today, but we'll start tomorrow, and Malfoy's already had his family's Chinese Fireball brought from home. He wants to ride a more dangerous dragon than everyone else, and I just don't get it. It's not like him."

"He's up to something."

"Well, yeah." Harry smiled a little. "Familiar territory, at least," he said, mostly to himself. His fingers had stopped moving on Ginny's arm, and he looked distant.

"Or," Ginny said, trying to bring him back, "perhaps he's had a change of heart and he really wants to help. Perhaps Malfoy has become a selfless philanthropist, who secretly wants to be of service to the people that he's hurt."

Harry stared at her in disbelief. "Huh?"

Ginny giggled. "Perhaps he just wants to be *friends*, Harry," she continued. "Who knows? You two might really get along, if you'd just give him a chance. You're so judgmental."

At this, Harry seemed to realize that she was joking. He gave her a lopsided smile. "Oh. Yeah, you're right. Maybe I'll bring him around for dinner."

"Yes, do." Ginny smiled, and leaned her head on his shoulder again, despising Malfoy, but not wanting to disrupt the entire conversation for his sake. It was too good, to be this close to Harry. And maybe it was better just to be here, than to get up and rant about the things that were unfair. Harry's hand resumed its slow motions on her arm, and, instead of taking her other hand again, he reached up and began idly playing with her hair. Ginny sighed and leaned her head back, forgetting that Malfoy existed. Harry was touching her. She'd had a dream like this, just last night—another nightmare about Tom, but at the end of it, Harry had shown up and touched her hair, like this, and then he'd bent his head...

Ginny opened her eyes, her mouth tingling, a sudden suspicion waking in her mind. "Harry," she asked slowly, "were you in my room this morning?"

He blushed. His hand faltered on her hair.

"You were," she said very quietly, turning her face so that her chin rested on his shoulder. Harry took his hand down and self-consciously cracked his knuckles against his leg. "Was I talking in my sleep?" she asked.

"Yeah." Harry was so red that Ginny could feel the heat of it.

"Thank you for helping," she said, and softly kissed his cheek again. She wanted him to turn his face—now—to look at her. "Hermione usually does."

"Do you have those dreams a lot?" His voice was low and unsteady.

"Not anymore." She touched her nose to his cheek. "Harry," she said quietly. He needed to turn his face.

When he did, his eyes were unfocused, behind his glasses. His mouth was slightly open. Ginny met his gaze and then, before anything could be said—before anyone could interrupt—she slowly moved her chin towards his.

The contact with his lips was so gentle that it almost hurt. Ginny shut her eyes and remained motionless, memorizing. *Harry*. Her heart slowed; time itself seemed to have taken a long, quiet pause, just for the two of them. Harry moved his thumb on her arm, and then he let go—a second later, both his hands cupped her face. She made a soft sound that was only his, and slipped her arms around him; their mouths opened, but exploration was tentative and shallow. Ginny was afraid to move too much. She had a feeling that, at any moment, she was going to break apart.

Somehow the kiss ended, as gently as it had begun. Harry pulled her legs across his lap and put his arms around her, and she sat curled against his chest with her face in the shoulder of his robes, holding onto him and trying to breathe. His heart pounded and she could feel it, beating out of rhythm with her own. It lulled her, and she didn't try to fight it.

"I'm tired," she mumbled, a long while later.

"Okay," Harry said, into her hair. But he didn't move.

Ginny didn't want to move, either. She didn't want to leave. Instead, she leaned toward the pillows, bringing Harry with her. He came willingly, spooning against her once they were both lying down, and letting out a long, satisfied exhale.

"We can't stay here," he said wistfully.

"Ron's out for awhile," Ginny said, fitting back against him. "Helping Sirius in London... They'll be gone for hours..."

Harry's arm tightened around her; he found her hand and kept it tucked in his own. "Just for a minute, then," he mumbled into her neck.

"Okay," Ginny sighed, so much in love that even her bones were exhausted. She was fast asleep in seconds, cocooned in the safe warmth of Harry, who dropped a last, soft kiss on her neck just before she drifted out.

At some point, when it was much darker in the house, she woke up disoriented. She was in her own bed, she realized, which meant that Harry must have carried her there and tucked her in. Her heart throbbed. She turned over and looked at the wall that separated their rooms, wishing that he had crawled beneath her covers and stayed the night—now that she knew what it was like to curl up beside him, his absence left a terrible emptiness. Ginny felt the pang of a sob coming on. She rolled onto her stomach and cried quietly into her pillow, both from the ache of wanting Harry, and from the deeper ache of truly having him for the first time.

Authors' Notes: This chapter will satisfy those of you who commented on the last chapter being too short. We would like to emphasize that we are not lawyers, nor do we play any on TV. The wizard legal system comes straight from our heads. It has evolved from the first wizard tribunal in Egypt in 2,987 ME (Muggle Era).

This chapter is dedicated to Norbert, who loves his mummy.

Charlie's Dragon Logbook

Part 1

26 July, 1997

Norbert's doing well. Tame as ever, even after the battle last week. Took out seven tents in that DE camp all by himself and isn't at all the worse for wear. Practically eats out of my hand. I told the rest of them I wasn't mad for wanting to train him up. Had a letter yesterday from Hagrid, asking about his growth; wrote the man back right off, of course. Great big sop. Guess I can't talk.

Speaking of Hagrid—new trainee today. Girl, just out of Hogwarts. Cho Chang, Ravenclaw, quiet sort. Showed up with no warning and no credentials or experience, just a letter from Hagrid saying that she'd always scored high in his class and had never been afraid of the bigger animals. Can't believe she came here on her own, in the middle of all this chaos—shows she's got the proper disregard for personal safety, anyway. Don't know what we're going to do with her yet, as she's not fit to go near dragons till she's had a bit of training, but Mick set her up in a corner of camp already with a stack of books, and if she wants to stay she'll have to teach herself what goes. No one here's got time to play professor. We had one like her show up a few months back, but she left after a week. Frustration, I think.

New dragon in the camp today, as well. Adam Stillwell brought him up from the Australian camp and gave me his papers. He's the first flight trained W.G. I've seen from anyone other than us. Awesome stuff. His name was Foster when we got him this morning but the lads've already switched the nameplate on his gate to read "Flatulo". I didn't have to ask why. Great frightening explosive dirty gas from that beast. I told Mick he could take him for a test-fly if he wanted, but I'm not going near the thing until he's got a proper diet in him. Whatever they fed him down under has him flaming out his arse as well as his mouth.

Think I'll write Fred and George about it.

5 September

Viking's ill. Inflammation of the cornea. Nasty looking infection, and Mick's so worried over him that half of what comes out of his mouth sounds like it could double for a speech from Mum. Not that I'm not worried—we need Viking to be in shape. Self-destructing message from Snape this morning to let us know that we might be called on for another battle in a week—this one in France. I guess Mont Ste. Mireille wasn't enough for those bastards. We'll need all our best dragons in top shape if we're going to make any difference—sounds like the battle's going to be a big one, and it's all up to us. They don't have a proper dragon camp set up in France yet, the ones in Germany and Spain aren't ready to fight, and most of the ones in Eastern Europe are either allied with the Bulgarian camp or else controlled by the DE forces. So that leaves us alone, in Britain and on the continent. No pressure, Weasley.

Still not over these directives from Snape. Completely bizarre, getting confidential war notes from him.

Owl from Ron this evening rather lightened the mood. Read it aloud to Mick, at supper. The youngest Weasley man wants advice on girls. "What should I buy for her birthday?" he asks. As if I know. Wrote back already: "Look, Ron, you're asking the wrong person. Here's a dragon talon, make it into a necklace or some such bullocks. Otherwise, talk to Percy—he's your married man."

By Arabella. An outtake for those who asked about Charlie and Cho.

Charlie keeps two sets of dragon-camp logs—one for public consumption and one for personal notes. A look at selections from his private logbook, dating from the first time Cho arrives at the dragon camp, in the middle of the war. We have left out all the boring bits, wherein Charlie examines the dragons, scale by painstaking scale. We have only included the entries in which he actually mentioned Cho.

Not that any of us are dealing with Percy. Fucking Ministry zealot. Never thought a brother of mine could have such a thick skull. Can't believe he's still with them. His wife must be mad to marry him when she knows where he stands. She can't be right in the head. She sounds nice enough in letters, though—not that she's writing to me. Cho Chang was a friend of hers in school, and they write back and forth. Penelope always sends a hello to me, which is nice, I suppose.

Cho's been doing straight research since she got here. Dead useful, she is, for looking stuff up and making sense of it. Getting a bit ahead of herself, though—presented herself the other day as “ready to get a bit closer to the dragons”. I laughed. A bit closer? You either get right up to them, or you stay far away. No in-between, with dragons. She looked a bit hacked off with me when I told her that, but she agreed that she wasn't ready to get right up to them, and that's probably sensible. Most people shouldn't risk it. You have to be a lunatic to do what I do, and she seems like a sane sister of Ravenclaw.

I'm so damn glad I'm a Gryffindor.

8 November

They attacked Switzerland. That's just... low. Not that I haven't expected low, but this was almost as bad as what they did to the French. Brought an army of Dementors with them—we had to get out of there pretty quick, though at least we managed to light a few Death Eating sons of bitches on fire before beating a retreat.

I can't believe I just wrote that. I don't know what's happened to me. I never could have done this a year ago. But today I rode Norbert towards a stranger, and then I sat up there and watched that person burn to death. I can't think about it. I keep telling myself he had no soul, he had no right to live, he was destroying villages and families and peace. But then what about what I'm doing? Did he have a family, did he have a—No, I can't think about it. I'll retch.

We brought the dragons back tonight and Norbert got cranky for the first time after a battle. We touched down in his enclosure and the ground keepers were out there waiting to get him harnessed and fed, but he turned his head and sprayed fire straight at Cho. It was her first day working with the animals, and talk about baptism by fire—she took second degree burns up and down her arm, screamed pretty bad but then just sat there on the ground, breathing hard and not crying. It got to me. I still felt like shit about killing that man, and there was one of my men—women, whatever—sitting there burnt up from the same dragon fire. I flew down there as fast as I could and got her to the meds tent. She's a fighter, that one. She'll be all right. Wonder if she'll ever go back out near the dragons, though.

My hand's shaking, and I keep seeing that Death Eater on fire. I have to call him “that Death Eater” even in my head, or I won't get through this. I just won't.

20 November

Wish this was over. My back aches. I'm tired of fighting. We had a gripe session round the fire tonight—I told everyone to get it all off their chests, and weren't they ready to do it? Everyone bitched and complained for hours. It might've been fun, if we'd had a bit of Butterbeer, but there's no telling when we'll have to be ready to fly, and I'm not going to fly drunk. Not in war, anyway. And neither are the rest of them, on my watch.

Mick didn't say anything, at campfire. He gripes in private with me, of course, so I know what all his troubles are—he worries about the effects of inclement weather on the dragons' hides and wings and flight capabilities, and on their general health. He's out of his mind about the three that have respiratory infections—which is only right, because they can't breathe fire when they're sick from rain like this, and if they can't breathe fire, they're useless in a fight. But he showed good leadership by keeping a brave face at the meeting. Good thing he's here—I wouldn't want to do it without him. Bill might like being off on his own in the desert, but I'll take my best mate, thanks. He's a pain, but he knows better than to mouth off when I need a little support.

Cho didn't say anything at campfire either, though I was expecting to hear it from her after she nearly got her arm burnt off. But she just took a bunch of notes, and then asked me after the “meeting” if I wanted to talk to her about a few ideas she has for restructuring the enclosures. She knows of some spell—something that'll make the dragons entirely invisible. Not the same as the enchantments around Hogwarts, though. These are specialized. I don't know what the hell she's talking about, but it seems worth looking into, and I'm glad she didn't take off after she got hurt. Took two days off for healing, and went right back to ground keeping. If she has an idea, I'll hear it out.

24 December

I've always been home or at Hogwarts for Christmas—or at least Mum and Dad've visited me in Romania. I've always got my sweater. But it's unsafe to send us packages by owl just now—they can be followed and found out much too easily. Three hundred Christmas packages all going to the same obscure spot? We'd be found and killed in hours. I'd rather live than get my sweater, I suppose—can't deny it stings, though, to go without it. And without Mum's fudge. And without Dad and Bill and maybe even Percy, that old windbag. Never spent many Christmases with the rest of them, but I wouldn't complain if Fred and George and Ron and Ginny showed up in the morning. I feel like a first year for saying it, but I'm a bit homesick. I need some Christmas cheer. Wish it weren't such a fire hazard to put tinsel on the dragons.

The camp made a collective decision not to bother with gifts for everyone—we each picked one name out of a hat last week, though, to try and keep the day festive. I got Burke Wooldridge. O'Malley helped me get my gift together—his family's got some sort of charm for turning anything into rum, so he put a spell on a bit of water for me, and there you are, Burke. That man's been pining for a flask, too. He'll have a happy enough Christmas. I hope whoever got me is planning to give me a foot rub. I'll close my eyes and pretend it's a beautiful woman. At this point, I don't bloody care.

25 December

Happy Christmas! I don't know who in the hell I think I'm talking to, putting Happy Christmas in my logbook—I've run mad, but at least I'm cheerful, and that's rare enough lately. Cho pulled my name out of the hat, and her gift was absolutely ripping. Big string of dragon teeth—when I put it on like a necklace, I look like one of those crazed ancient dragon-keeping wizards they've got drawings of in the history books. I should be practicing the voodoo arts in this thing. She said something like "I don't know if you'll want it, but I had all these teeth hanging about and I never knew what I was going to do with them, so here you are." Like I wouldn't want them! "And what kind of girl has fangs hanging about in enormous quantities?" I asked her. She told me she's had a thing for dragons for a few years, and she's been collecting all sorts of stuff. I asked her if she really wanted to give up the collection and she said yeah, that she's "ready". I asked her what that meant, and she didn't answer. So I asked her what kind of dragon it was that got her started obsessing, and she said it was a Swedish Short Snout—and then. She pulled up her shirt a bit. And great flying old wizards, the girl has got a TATTOO round her navel, of a fire breathing Short Snout. My heart about stopped. I can't BELIEVE I never thought of getting a tattoo. Blast this war, I want one NOW—a BIG one, up my back and round my chest, blasting fire all over me. Can't believe she's got a tattoo of a dragon. I nearly stuck out a finger to pet it, but then I remembered her navel's attached to the rest of her, and she might not be keen on having me stick my finger in it. Or maybe she would. Maybe I should've.

Never mind all that—I broke the rules and worked out a gift for Mick—couldn't skip out on him at Christmas. He is now the proud new owner of a talking rock. Nothing else around here, really, so I charmed the bit of rock in the wall by his pillow to say filthy things to him when he tries to lie down later. Poor old man—he misses the bachelor life, so I thought I'd bring a taste of it here for him. I expect he'll get me back, but then who knows? Maybe he'll like the way the rock thinks. Heh.

Excellent Christmas, all things considered.

6 January, 1998

I can't stop shaking. The letter I just had from Dad. Ron, abducted to a DE camp. But Harry and Hermione got him back. He's at school again. It happened at Christmas—almost two weeks ago, and this is the first I heard. Dad waited to tell me because there was nothing I could do. So I wouldn't worry. How could he think I'd want to be spared that worry? I just sent off a blistering letter. Dad didn't deserve it, but they better never keep anything like this from me again.

I don't know what to say to Ron. All I know is, I like Harry. A lot. But right now, I wish Ron had never met him.

I don't know if I can even write this next part, but I have to.

Rubeus Hagrid was my friend. And according to the letter from Dad, Hagrid is dead.

9 January

Dragons are all well. All breathing fire, all eyes are healthy, all respiratory tracts are clear, all talons are sharp, all teeth are intact except Fidance's. He's always got two or three cracked fangs. I don't know how he does it.

Letter from Ron's girlfriend. Very short. She said she's writing to each of us because Ron's in a bit of a daze and "hasn't the heart to write" but he wants us to know he's all right. She also wrote that the service for Hagrid was this morning. I knelt outside in the trench with a bunch of old Hogwarts students, and we were silent together for a long time. I've never seen such a lot of men cry at once. Cho cried so hard that she nearly choked herself. She got up after awhile and went back to the cave by herself—later on, I asked her why she left, and she said she couldn't control herself and she didn't want to disturb anyone. Poor thing's cried herself out, now. She's in her corner, asleep. She must've loved Hagrid.

Mick's still weeping, but I'll let him alone. He pretended not to notice me sobbing my guts out. At least I can do the same for him.

19 January

No battles. No messages. Nothing. Stuff Hagrid said keeps flashing into my mind. "Charlie, the thing ter remember is that pets're jus' like people. Yeh jus' treat 'em with respect and no matter what size they are, they'll know yeh mean well and they'll let yeh get ter know 'em."

Beautiful letter from Ginny. I didn't know she realized how close I was with Hagrid. I'm worried for her, actually. Fred and George used to tease about her having a thing for Harry, and I think they were right, just from watching her at Percy's wedding. She had her eyes on Harry the whole day. And I suppose I'm a bastard, but after what happened to Ron, I hope Ginny's over her crush. I don't want her near Harry. I don't want her taken off and tortured. They must've tortured Ron, there's no way around it. I keep telling myself that it's amazing the nine of us have made it this far, and that something had to happen to someone, and that it's lucky he survived. But I wish it'd been me.

Cho caught me sitting here looking glum, earlier today. She asked if I wanted to talk about it. I didn't think I did, but it actually helped, telling her I'd miss Hagrid. I told her about what happened to Ron, too, and maybe I shouldn't've said anything, but I told her what my worries were, what with my whole family being so close to Harry. I expected her to think I was a bit selfish, but she seemed to get it. She said, "It's like standing just to the right of a target, isn't it?" I was glad she agreed, so I said, "Yeah, it is. And it's not that I want Harry to get hit, believe me—but it'd be so easy for the one next to him to get hit, and the one next to him is usually Ron, as I understand it." Cho just said, "Usually." But she didn't seem in the mood to talk much, after that.

Norbert's well. Fed him myself today. Wanted to take him up, but we don't know who's around here and it's not safe to fly just for fun. I need to fly this off. I need a good, hard game of Quidditch. Cho sent for someone to do those invisibility enchantments, or whatever they are. There's a witch who's supposed to be amazing at this stuff, and she's been working in the war effort, so it was simple to contact her. Maybe she'll get here soon. I hope so. I need a game.

2 February

The Enchantress has arrived. There's no other word for her. She's a goddess, this girl. Too bad she's such a bitch, or we really could've had something. "Sharlie, I need zis and zat." Nothing but demands since she got here. Mick says she's part veela, but those old love-charm repellants we put on ourselves in school to ward off ardent females must still be working, because The Enchantress is getting on my nerves. Still, from across the cave, if I don't have to listen to her, then she's nice to have around. Decorative. Cho showed her out through the trench and showed her what she has to do—where the dragons are, what needs to be made invisible, all of it. I just let Cho do it on her own—she's taken quite a tone of authority around here in the past month or so, though I don't remember promoting her. Doesn't matter, though. Apparently we'll have "ze Diversion Enchantments" in place in just a couple of days. I can't wait. That's going to be amazing.

February

Not sure what day it is. Haven't been out of bed in two weeks. Don't know what's happening with the dragons. Perhaps they're all sick, perhaps they've all dropped like flies. I don't care. I was up and about the day Bill left. Trying to keep a brave face in front of him, I suppose. And then the minute he left I went to my sleeping bag and I haven't had the strength for shit. Mick's been bringing me supper. Not that he should bring me anything, not that anyone should help. I can't even look my team in the eyes. We were called to battle today and I stayed here, in the cave.

What a cowardly, worthless bit of dung I am, for cringing from a fight. My brother died for this, and I'm in bed.

I haven't said those words yet, or written them. My brother died, my brother's dead. Percy's gone. Percival Ferdinand Weasley, aged twenty-one, was tortured and killed and his body isn't even going to get a burial. It's not real, because it can't be. It won't go through my head. Mum and Dad haven't written, and I haven't written them. What in the world would I say? Dear Mum, what a sad loss. No, fuck the condolences. Fuck this whole war. Fuck Bill for coming here and telling me, and fuck Percy—stupid ass, why did he get himself caught, why did he try to go home, why wasn't he home in the first place—FUCK them for taking him. I'll kill them. I'll kill them, and this time, I won't feel mercy afterwards, and wonder how their families are. I hope they suffer, all of them, and everyone who loves them.

God I'm glad I don't have to look Mum in the face right now. I couldn't handle it. I can't even think about her. He was her favorite.

I don't know why I can't stop thinking about this one stupid memory, my first summer home from Hogwarts, lazing about with Bill, the two of us down at the pond throwing stuff in. We hadn't done a lick of work—I hadn't even practiced flying, really. And out toddles Percy—he must've been six or so—with this stack of schoolbooks in his arms. History of Magic, Standard Book of Spells, all of it. And he says, "I brought your homework!" all proud like. And we two laughed and poked him and told him to sod off, and Bill picked him up and carried him back to the house and put him inside, and then came back out. Five minutes later, out comes Percy again, this time looking stubborn, still carrying the books. "You have to do your homework," he tells us, all indignant. "Or you won't know anything. That's what Mum said." We laughed at him, and Bill took him in again. The third time he came out, we got irritated—told him to go away and let us have a rest. Told him to go help Mum with the babies—he was always doing that. I'll never forget how upset he looked, all disappointed in us and left out of the fun. He went back in and we both felt guilty, and finally Bill sighed and said we should go and get the babies ourselves, really. I went with him. We ended up towing Perce and Fred and George outside, Ron was barely walking on his own, Bill carried Ginny, and we all settled down outside and played together. Percy was thrilled. I remember that was the first day I put him on my broom and let him have a go. He sprained his wrist and Mum spanked me out of my wits, but it was worth it. He was happy. It's funny how people think of us—we're this big family, so we must've spent loads of time playing together, getting into scrapes. Not really. That's one of the only times I can remember all seven of us together in the same spot, outside of eating dinner. Maybe that's why it won't get out of my head. Because that'll never happen again, because there aren't seven now. I don't know why I'm writing this in a logbook. I suppose this isn't a logbook anymore. I suppose I should shut up. Nothing profound is going to happen here, and Percy is still dead no matter what I remember.

I can hear the dragons landing outside, above. They're back. They'll be in, any minute. What these men must think of me, I have no idea. I'm ashamed to lie here. But I just can't get up.

19 February

I'm up. Dragons are all well. A cracked fang here, a singed wing there, but nothing serious. I wrote to Mum and Dad. I don't remember what I said. I hope it was all right.

Wasn't sure how the other riders and keepers would treat me after the way I've behaved, but they all seem to understand. Or if they don't, at least they're being respectful. Mick must've pounded it into them to let me alone, because they've all let me have my grief and no one's said a word about me missing that fight. Except Cho, who came right over to me when they got back yesterday, sat by my bag and took one of my hands in both of hers. It was startling, and I really didn't want to be touched, I tried to get my hand back but she held onto it and just bowed her head and sat there. Eventually, I bowed my head as well and it was awhile before I realized I was praying. I know a lot of Muggle-born kids who were religious, but I never have been. Mum says there's something out there greater than we are, but I've never thought much about it. Never believed it, to tell the truth. But yesterday I sat there and prayed so hard that something's out there, and that it's good, and that it's taking care of Percy. And while I was thinking that, trying not to cry, Cho said, "You have to get up and walk through this. You can't let it have you. It's going to hurt like hell, but you have to fight."

Well that got me. I finally know what she's about, I could tell by the way she said it. I looked at her and asked, "Who did you lose?"

She said, "Someone I loved. It's not the same as a brother, but it was a blow."

And I don't know why, but I felt like I could tell her I was ashamed of myself. I told her I didn't know how I could get up and lead the team after I refused to go to battle. I told her they wouldn't listen to a coward. She told me that grief and cowardice aren't the same, and that everyone here knows the difference—and that I was badly missed in the fight. She didn't pull any punches, she

told me if I don't come next time, I'll be putting people in danger, because it's difficult to handle Norbert properly when I'm not there. I asked her who rode him for me. "I did," she said. "But I want a different dragon next time. I'm not the right rider for Norbert." God damn but she surprised me.

It's stupid to say this, because I'm sure I'm just clinging to something good, something to stop me thinking about Percy. But I wouldn't have got up if she wasn't here. It really does hurt like hell. I wish I were still in bed. But she's glanced at me every so often today, like she's checking on me, and I straighten up for her every time. And then I think what a man Percy was in his last moments, and I straighten up even more.

I admit I'm glad it's lights out. I'm exhausted just from being awake. I'm going to miss him for the rest of my life.

13 March

We've done something very, very wrong. Quite against rules and regulations. Possibly fatal. Entirely stupid. Would never have happened if O'Malley didn't have that family recipe.

Have I ever been this drunk. I don't think so. I felt better for an hour but now I feel worse but at least I talked to Percy. Cho told me it's good to do. Just walk along, talk out loud, say what you didn't get to say. Percy, I love you, I'm sorry for all those times I was a wanker, I could've been a better brother, where are you, can you even hear this. That sort of thing. She said it helped her get over Cedric. She must've drunk her share of that flask, she's never talked about that before. Showed me the tattoo again, told me what it's significant of. Here we were having this damn serious important conversation and I'm staring at her stomach wanting to touch it. I'm no good. Mick went to touch it but he never got there, I think I broke his finger on accident. Shit, I'm entirely annihilated.

Fucking hell.

27 March

Norbert's fine. Viking's doing very well, the last stages of his taming have worked out and Mick's in love with the beast. I feel like I haven't kept good track of the dragons for awhile. I need to focus.

It's been a rough month. There was a nasty fight on the 15th—I nearly fell off Norbert when I saw Stephen Banks riding with the Dark army crew. He was in my class. In Ravenclaw. I'm used to seeing Slytherins against us, but Stephen wasn't a bastard, he was all right—he was ambitious in a normal way, he just wanted to do well. He was the Seeker on their team—we had a great time playing, I never had a better opponent in school, and he was brilliant fun in Hogsmeade. I nearly called for a retreat when I saw one of our dragons shoot fire at him.

And then I wondered if he was standing there when they killed Percy. I didn't call for a retreat. When I saw Banks catch fire, fall off his dragon and crash, I didn't even blink. I'm turning into something I didn't think I could be. I used to think it was a bad thing to be this brutal, but I don't know. If we stop them, then it's all worth it.

Damn Dumbledore. I know what I just said is wrong. I can hear him in my head, going on about the ends not always justifying the means. But he's gone and we have to stop them.

12 April

Easter doesn't feel like much this year. It's just another day. It's Bill's birthday. That makes him an Aries, I suppose. Divination still sticks in my head, anyway—we'll pretend my education wasn't wasted on me.

I spend a lot of time telling myself that Snape might've been wrong and Percy might be alive. I told Mick that and he said he'd be trying to think the same thing if he were in my shoes, so he won't tell me to stop it. But when I told Cho, she put her hand on my arm and said that I'm being cruel to myself. Snape wouldn't've given my parents particulars about something like that, she said, unless he was certain. I wish she would've lied. I wanted her to lie.

I've had a letter from Ron. Apparently he and his girlfriend have had some sort of brilliant idea, but he says no more than that, just mentions that he's always looked up to me and he wants me to take care. Never had a letter like that from him before. I got a note from Ginny too, and it's the sickest thing I've ever read. It feels like a goodbye. She wants me to know how much she loves me, she says. She says she remembers when me and Bill used to take one of her hands each, and swing her back and forth. I have a terrible feeling about it. It's all something to do with Harry. We're all in this war, but they're in the eye of it, and part of me thinks I'll never see them again.

I'm being a morbid bastard.

30 April

I can't do this. Assignment just received: to take top riders into DE camp on broomstick under cover of invisibility, the next time the DE's go for a dragonless strike, and bring a few of their dragons to our side. Snape seems to think we'll have a chance to get to their dragons unimpeded and fly them out of there within the next two days. And if we can't fly them out, if there's too much security or if they're somehow only controllable by Dark magic, then we're to kill them off.

I can't just kill off dragons. Is it sick that this makes me angrier than I am when I have to kill men? The dragons didn't ask for this. They're just animals. They're pawns.

I gathered Mick, Burke, Lisa and Cho—they're my team for this. Mick flatly refused to take part, at first, but I told him he hasn't got a choice. He's necessary, he'll know if we can fly them or not, he's got intuition about those things. Burke can fly anything that's trained, so we need him. Lisa's deadly with a crossbow—she's old fashioned about things, but it'll work to our advantage here—she can kill the dragons without magic, and magic would call attention to us. They've surely got traps set. I didn't want to bring Cho, but she's so valuable when it comes to technicalities—she can get us in and out undetected. Her understanding of magic theory is way beyond mine, she'll know how best to hide us.

To think Mum's biggest worry used to be that I'd get burns on my arms.

2 May

Operation successfully completed. No team members lost. Seven dragons slaughtered. It was awful. Mick's never going to get over it, he's the one who condemned them. Said we'd never fly them out of there, they were charmed or drugged—something impossible to manage. Lisa's not looking too good; she had to kill them all herself, one poison dart to the throat apiece. Cho said no magic—she detected wards around us and they would've gone off at the first swish and flick. So the murders were manual—I've never watched anything so gruesome and unfair. I won't ask Lisa to do anything else until it's unavoidable.

One dragon was brought back to camp, though. Burke has a real gift for dragon handling, I just wish we could've saved more of them. Beautiful, big Welsh Green, and Burke's really taken to her—he's calling her Helga. It's funny how none of us ever gets over his Hogwarts House. If I ever get out of here and get an enormous, three-headed dog, like I want to, I'm calling it Godric. I told Cho, when we got back, that she really should've been in Gryffindor—she was something last night. No fear at all. She got riled up when I said that, though. "Ravenclaw was all the House I needed, thanks." I just meant it as a compliment, but I guess Gryffindor doesn't have the monopoly on House pride. Touchy, touchy.

19 May

I'm twenty-seven today. Hurrah, me. Weepy birthday owl from Mum. Usually I'd laugh at her for being dramatic, but it's different, now we've lost Percy. I wish I were home. She says as soon as this is all over, we're having a memorial service. She wants me to speak about him. I don't know if I'd make it through. I'm not much of a speaker in the first place and I don't want to break down. His wife's going to speak. She's nearly four months pregnant, Mum says, and living at the Burrow until she has the baby. I don't know what to think of that. I can't believe Perce isn't going to see his own baby.

Cho thinks I'll be a wonderful uncle. And the way she sounded when she said it made me wonder if she—well. Perhaps I'm mad, but sometimes I wonder if she isn't interested in me, just a little. She's never said a word, though. I don't know what to say to her, either, ever since that night she told us all about Cedric. I get a feeling she's keeping herself off limits. It's not that she's devoted to him... but she's moved on without forgetting him for one second. That tattoo is always going to be there. I wouldn't know where to fit into her life. I doubt she'd even want me to try.

But it's bloody unreal, the amount of time I spend thinking about her. It's crept up on me and can't keep it in anymore. I'm like a third year. I don't think I've ever had any girl on the brain like this, and she's so different from the girls I've dated that I don't know what to compare it to. She's self-sufficient. She's got short hair. She rides dragons—she never lies to me. She's damn young, but somehow it doesn't matter. She's done Billywigs, she told me—we're going to get our hands on some when this is over and do them together. She's got a smile she should use more often. I don't remember looking at a woman the way I've been looking at her. And I'm not usually a pessimist, but I get the feeling it's not mutual. I have the worst fear that she's going to want to be friends. In fact, I think we are friends.

Damn it—we are! How could I let that happen? Sloppy work, Weasley. Sloppy work.

Charlie's Dragon Logbook

Part 2

June 17

I know, I know, there's a sodding war on, but we ran a scrimmage today. Mel scratched a few broomsticks together—mainly Cleansweep Fives. I was Seeker, naturally—Cho played the other Seeker. Not a bad flier—course, she *was* Seeker for Ravenclaw.

It was a great game—not technically, mind—we were all out of shape, and broomsticks are nothing like dragons to fly, but I think we needed to remind ourselves that there was more to life than riding dragons into battle every day.

Cho said something similar—she was going to quit the Ravenclaw team in Sixth year, after Cedric (I mean, quit *Quidditch?*), but Dumbledore had a chat with her, convinced her otherwise, and she said it helped. Reminded her that she was entitled to enjoy herself still, and I think we all understood that today.

I got the Snitch, of course. Yeah, she's a good flier, but she's not *that* good.

Great man, Dumbledore. We miss him.

June 25

What the *hell* is this all about? What drove us all to fight each other? We're all just numb at the moment, the camp's quiet, the dragons are subdued.

We lost two riders today. No, we didn't lose them, they were killed. Aurelius Jardine, Olly for short; he was riding Algar—I never saw the hit, just saw them plummeting to the forest in flames. No-one saw what happened to Katie—she was riding Alice—one moment she was there on Mick's wing, and the next...

These are *good* people, and they're all sitting around the camp, stunned. They didn't ask for this. Sometimes I wonder if the Death Eaters did. Seriously, though, I don't know how much more I can take of this.

Cho's wandered off somewhere... wonder if she's OK? Better go and check...

June 30

Bloody hell, Harry.

July 1

Most of the team are lying in today, stayed up well into the morning—they earnt it. So it's just me, this morning—even the dragons are sleeping in.

Don't know why I didn't join them, really, but I just couldn't; kept on thinking about Hogwarts. Dad was there. Ginny and Ron, of course. I remember those two being *born* for crying out loud...

The stories are still a bit garbled, but the basic line is the same. He did it. He really did.

Again.

July 2

Bill's turned up—gave him the sofa to crash on—said he wanted a week or so to recharge his batteries before getting back to Gringotts and Egypt. The whole world's still pinching itself, to make sure they're not dreaming.

And we're really not. It really *is* over, and we really did win.

It's good to have Bill about the place; tried teasing him about that Veela we had doing the charms up here in February, but it didn't go down too well.

Cho's keeping herself busy–haven't even had a chance to introduce her to Bill yet; she only needs him to have met the full set.

July 8

Knew it was too good to last... things never finish cleanly.

That's it, leaving Romania, heading back to Britain. Dad's just left the fireplace–they've got problems with Dementors running about the place in Britain–Kitty Douglas got Kissed, and all hell's about to break out.

Best thing is that Bill's got a transfer to Diagon Alley–so the two of us are heading back to the Burrow tonight, surprise Mum, and then get ourselves established.

I've offered to take the team across to help, but obviously we've got to leave some people here to staff the camp. I figure that if Mick and I go back, we can leave Cho in charge of things here, at least temporarily.

She's really got into her work here–rode as hard as anyone in the war, great on the technical stuff–bit small for the *really* heavy stuff, but I'd better not let her hear me say that.

Don't know how we'd have coped without her, really.

From dragons to Dementors: nice going, Charlie.

July 10

Owled Cho, just to make sure she was on top of things at the camp, let her know what we're up to at Azkaban, the usual sort of thing.

Mad-Eye Moody gets more insane by the day. I swear, if I hear 'constant bloody vigilance' one more time this week I'm... well, I s'pose he's got a point.

It's a grim place, Azkaban–glad that we've got the flat in Diagon Alley, rather than bunking up in the guardroom with some of the other Aurors. So that's the three of us there; Bill, Mick and myself. Bill's fed up with the Goblins already, seems to spend every chance he can to help out at the Ministry; can't say I blame him, either.

July 13

Owl from Cho–camp's running OK, but she's had a bit of a brainwave–heh, she's a Ravenclaw all right–and wondered if anyone's thought of harnessing dragons' natural energy to keep the Dementors at bay.

Owled her back immediately, of course, told her to get it all down on paper and I'll present it to Dad–the Minister of Magic–to see if we can get some kind of trial going. Thinking about it, it makes sense–we could relocate the camp to Azkaban–there are plenty of Muggle-diversion charms there already, plus it'd give Cho a chance to get back, as well.

She said she missed this place.

July 17

Just got back from seeing Dad–in the Minister's Office!–and Bill at the Ministry. Dad looks, dignified–almost hard to believe he's got that collection of Muggle batteries in the garage when you look at him in Ministry robes.

He also looks tired. There's a photograph of Percy in the office–he's doing his Percy thing of trying to look important without looking pompous.

But heh, you should *see* the gym that's wasted on those office-types. Fan-bloody-tastic, I tell you... Bill should give it a go sometime–might stop him trying to ferret out Cho's name from me.

Not that there's anything going on. Owled her, anyway, to let her know that the meeting went OK–it was all her doing: her idea, her paper. If anyone deserves this to work, it's Cho.

Oh yeah, Stillwell sent Mick some Billywigs from Down Under. Bill, of course, was all ex-Head Boy about it, but I've told Mick to keep his eye on 'em. Beneath the calm, cool boyish exterior of William Weasley beats the heart of a wild deranged lunatic.

I'm almost sure of it.

Billywigs: Cho and I promised we'd do some once it was all over...

July 25

Well, Mick brought Viking across from the camp to use in the trials—Cho's kept the place running more than well enough; pity we couldn't bring her across to Azkaban for the trials, but really there's no-one else at the camp who could replace her there.

Still, if this works out, she'll be able to join the operation at Azkaban. And I've got a good feeling about this, no matter what Bill says. Honestly, people get so one-dimensional about dragons: 'great-big-meat-eating-vicious-tempered-magical-monster'. Oh yeah, 'fire-breathing' too. But there's a *whole* lot more to them than that...

The Aurors are getting tired up here. You can see it in their faces—rings under the eyes and all that. You can't conjure Patronus after Patronus, day after day. We need something to keep them on the rock, and Cho's proposal might do just that. And then Bill had better bloody well eat his words and admit that it *was* a good idea.

Owled Cho to let her know we arrived back OK, and promised updates on the trials; she'll want to be kept abreast of all that stuff.

The world's gone upside down—we're trying to stop the guards from escaping their prison...

August 4

I'm certain now, if I wasn't before: they dropped the Twins on their heads when they were born. Fred's *married*! And if that wasn't bad enough, he got hitched without telling Mum! They've been married a fortnight already—well if they want a present they can get stuffed; should've told us if they want the works.

And it was all a *bet*... you've got to admire their nerve, telling Mum like that. Course, it was at Harry's birthday party, so they probably figured she'd been in a good enough mood that they could slip something like that past her... Maybe they were dropped more than once.

Cho knew Angelina—she was Chaser in the Gryffindor team, so I guess she must be alright. But getting married on a bet? If I didn't know better, I'd say they just did it to wind Mum up...

Anyway, the trials are going well—Cho predicted that we wouldn't need to get any closer than fifty yards to the Dementors, and, of course, she seems pretty much spot on about that. Wish she could get a chance to come out and see us flying, just to see her idea working. But in all probability, if the Ministry's got any sense, she'll be out here soon enough anyway.

I mean, it *works*—how can they *not* say yes to the idea?

So from dragons, to Dementors, to dragons and Dementors *at the same time*. Charles Beaugard Weasley, you have a misplaced sense of adventure.

August 5

Harry's turned up, here, at Azkaban. With a sodding Dementor. He's driven the thing up here from the Cannons practice pitch—48 hours straight—must've escaped somehow, made its way down, and then Harry took it upon himself to drive it back here.

It's been said before, it'll be said again, but there is *something* about Harry. He's sleeping now, exhausted... Mum always said it was best to let him sleep when he could.

August 8

Bill's up to something; saw him sneaking out from Knockturn Alley this morning, but he's not said a word to anyone.

Dad's arranged a meeting to discuss setting up a permanent dragon camp at Azkaban. The trials have gone well, and the strain on the Aurors is obvious. The sooner we get the dragons flying the better, if you ask me—we could get Cho out here too, then. She says the camp's running OK—spirits are a bit low, though; getting back on dragon-back ought to cheer them up a bit, though.

Nothing in the world like flying a dragon.

August 11

Met with Minister Dad, and Moody. Sirius Black was there too, and so was Bill.

Mick and I got there a bit late—picked up a light burn at the end of the morning flight; nothing to worry about, but the medi-wizard insisted on patching it up. Not quite the same as the way Cho used to fuss, but seemed professional enough.

Still, we hadn't missed anything important by the time we did arrive, and then it was straight down to business, no messing. Runs a tight ship, dad does.

Secretary Privy Rose K. Brown, the Slytherin Sweetheart, was there too. Ministry Officials: honestly, got to have reserve riders for working the shifts at Azkaban, but mention reserve dragons and it's all 'but what can happen to a dragon?'

Mick knows how to put her in her place, though—serves her right for not recognising him in the first place.

So Dad approved the plan. He can do that, he's Minister for Bloody Magic! We're setting up a smaller camp—nine dragons, Welsh Greens—although I did wonder whether we might bring the Norwegian Ridgeback across...

And then I figure we could get that Charms witch—*Bill's Charm's* witch—to repeat the diversion charms she conjured during the war.

Still, nine riders. Cho'd said in her last owl that most of the riders from the war had had enough. She'll ride (of course she'll ride), there's Mick, there's me. Don't know where we're going to get the others from, though. Owled Cho right after the meeting; it was her idea, after all, and this gives her her chance to get back to Britain.

We still need to find those riders, though. But dragon riding. Who *wouldn't* want to?

August 18

Burke's arrived, with Cho and the others. We brought over another three Welsh Greens, so we've got four now. That's still one more dragon than we have riders for. It must be the Dementor business that's putting people off, I suppose.

Rose is constantly hassling us for news on updates. We have to be running by September (although from the looks of the Aurors about the place, the sooner we get going the better), and right now I really can't see where our new riders are going to come from.

August 25

OK, this is it, we're officially desperate for riders now. Rose has made us write to all the Quidditch Seekers directly, to ask them if they'll sign up to join PAP. I tried explaining to her that we can't just have anyone riding our dragons, but she can be surprisingly forceful, and in the end it took Mick to placate her.

He's chasing a lost cause there, though: she hates him.

Harry's trying out for the Cannons. I know this because I've just written a postscript on his letter; Harry's a natural flier—he'd *love* the chance to fly dragons for a living.

August 27

Oh Ronald... woke up this morning to find a Ministry owl badgering me to get to dad's office at once. No explanation or anything (well, I don't think there was, but Bill insists that I would've been sent the cutting too).

Anyway, ickle brother Ronniekins got into a fight with Draco Malfoy, and, of course, because it's Ron, and because it's Dad, it's front page news. Mum is going to have a *fit*.

Still, it's hard not to see the funny side. And it's a Malfoy-talk about being long overdue for a good thumping. And no, I don't care what happened to his dad.

Bugger. It was Percy and Penny's first anniversary today. Would've been, anyway. Bill's been working up at Azkaban the past couple of days; we mention him occasionally—it gets a bit easier each time, but... damn. And Penny's nearly due, too. I'll be an uncle. Mad, fearless, dragon-riding, Dementor-chasing Uncle Charlie. Y'know, I kind of like that...

Rose has told us to follow up every single letter to our Seeker candidates for dragon-riders. I was all for 'accidentally' forgetting to send the Falcons one, but Mick warned me that it wouldn't be wise to risk Rose's wrath. And, knowing her, she probably would find out, too.

Shame that Harry turned it down last time—I put a postscript on his letter again—told him to ignore it. More because I felt I had to than because I meant it, though. Mum'd *kill* me if she thought I'd talked Harry into dragon riding. Pity, though—he's a natural, he'd *love* it.

Anyway, the letters can wait 'til after the weekend—Mick's got a wedding to go to. Burke's going down to Gloucester, so it'll just be me and Cho. Well, someone's got to keep an eye on the place, haven't they?

A/N: Thanks go to A&Z, naturally, for writing AtE in the first place, and then to Laurel, without who's timeline this would've been *impossible*, and without who's eagle eyes it would've had even more mistakes!

— CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO —

Without Restraint

“Go ahead and mount him.”

Harry heard Burke’s voice, but he wasn’t about to heed it. He couldn’t breathe. He gripped his Firebolt until his knuckles went white and stared through his fireproof goggles at Norbert’s enormous tail.

“Like we talked about,” Burke continued calmly. “Just stay out of his peripheral vision—fly up slowly, approach from behind, and drop down into the harness. Then strap your broom down, and lock in. Harry. Harry, are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Harry said mechanically. “I’m fine.”

“Bit slow on the uptake, Potter?” Draco Malfoy was fully strapped into his harness and he held Mordor’s reins with perfect authority. He didn’t even seem to need his trainer, who sat behind him in full gear, looking very pleased with his progress.

“You’ve ridden before,” she complimented.

“No,” Draco said, still smirking at Harry. “But I’m not afraid of an animal with a brain that’s smaller than mine.”

“Most animals must terrify you, then,” Harry muttered.

“What’s that, Potter? Can’t hear you from all the way up here.” Malfoy lifted Mordor’s reins a bit higher and his gaudy ring glinted, infuriating Harry. “Up,” he said with command.

“Just excellent,” said Draco’s trainer, as Mordor lifted smoothly into the air. “This is really something—I’ve never seen this breed behave so beautifully.”

“Animals take after their masters,” was the last thing Harry heard from Malfoy as his dragon moved out over the sea.

“Right, that’s it,” Harry muttered, and before he could think about it too much, he

took off into the air and aimed his Firebolt at Norbert’s harness attachment, which was specially built to fit over the dragon’s sharply ridged back. Harry dismounted, dropped into the seat, awkwardly found the stirrups with his booted feet, fastened his Firebolt to the front of the saddle, and reached down by his hips to grab the straps. The straps were heavy loops of flat, fireproof material, not unlike Muggle seatbelts. Harry pulled the right one over his head so that it rested on his left shoulder, and did the opposite with the one on the left so that they crossed him in an X and held him firmly to the seat. He reached behind him and adjusted the height of the seatback until it supported him fully, then leaned back to find the angle that was most comfortable. He locked the seatback into place and pulled another belt out of either side of it—this one he locked around his waist. When he was finished, he pulled on his gloves and snapped the wrists of his Ministry-issue dragon riding jacket around them. He adjusted his headgear—a heavy sort of hat with no visor, which came down over his ears and snapped across and beneath his chin. No part of him was vulnerable. He felt for his wand, which he’d slid into a specially protected, narrow pocket on the side of trousers, and pulled it out.

“Ready,” he said, feeling much more confident. That hadn’t been so bad. No wonder Malfoy had managed it.

“Very good,” Burke said, strapping himself into place behind him. “You forgot this, however.” He reached around Harry, holding a satchel. “You’ll want it, believe me.”

“Right—thanks,” said Harry, strapping it into place beside his broom. It was his food, water, and emergency supply of chocolate.

“And you practiced the Hygienic Dehydration Charm,” Burke said. “Right?”

Harry nodded, not really wanting to discuss the charms that made toilets unnecessary.

“Then let’s go.”

Harry grabbed Norbert's reins. "Up!" he commanded.

It was neither as thrilling as his first time on a broomstick, nor as unnerving as riding Buckbeak. It was... calm. Norbert rose into the air, breathing fire before him, and Harry raised his wand quickly, casting a Wind Charm to deflect the flames—more for his broomstick's sake than for his own. He hated that the Firebolt had to be strapped to the front of the saddle, and he'd cast the strongest Inflammable Charm on it that he could find. Still, he wanted to be careful.

"You don't even need me," Burke laughed, as the flames arched away from them. "Should've known. Harry Potter, and all that."

Harry pretended he hadn't heard that remark, and leaned back against his seat, steering towards Azkaban. The massive, steely-gray fortress came into view below him and Harry circled it, his heart pounding as he looked down at the prison's rotting turrets and rusting bars. Sirius had been in there for twelve years. Twelve *years*. There was no comprehending it.

A jet of fire shot up from behind one of the prison's walls, and Harry saw Viktor's dragon rise up from behind it. Viktor looked unafraid—he even seemed to be enjoying himself in conversation with Andras. Harry raised his wand in lieu of a wave, and Viktor waved in return, but stayed far back. They were to keep equidistant, each rider holding responsibility for a third of the island's circumference. Harry reflected that he'd have to look up a charm that allowed him to talk to Viktor from far off, or this would get boring pretty fast—there had to be a spell similar to a walkie-talkie. He'd write and ask Hermione.

"And there's our problem," Burke muttered. "See it, Harry?"

A Dementor was working its way across the water, gliding toward the shore as quickly as it could.

Harry pulled back on Norbert's reins and gave the short series of harmless jerks that let the dragon know it was time to descend. Norbert snuffled and dropped low, coming within feet of the Atlantic's surface. Harry raised the reins again and Norbert shot towards the advancing creature. At fifty yards' distance, the Dementor was supposed to be repelled by the dragon's enormous aura, and Harry was relieved to see that it really worked. Norbert's approach drove the Dementor back to the island at top speed. It slithered between the walls and disappeared.

"Success," Burke said, clapping Harry on the shoulder. "Nicely done. I don't think I'll need a week out here with you—just tell Charlie when you feel comfortable doing this on your own, all right?"

"Sure." Harry directed Norbert back into the air. He didn't tell Burke that his skin was crawling beneath the protective gear, or that he felt cold to the bone. He didn't mention that he'd just heard his mother's death. *It's not that bad*, he told himself. *It's only an echo. It's not like they're right up close.*

But the second Dementor made the echo a little louder. And the third one brought back a strong memory of seventh year that made Harry dizzily depressed. "*We believe that Mr. Weasley has been abducted*," Professor McGonagall had said, looking white as a sheet. Harry felt, again, the plummeting, ice-cold horror—he shifted in his harness and tried to shake that day out of his brain, but the fourth Dementor brought it flooding right back in.

Professor McGonagall had broken the news to him in the hospital wing. He had stumbled back to Gryffindor and broken it to Hermione, and he hadn't known which was worse—fearing the loss of Ron, or watching Hermione fear it. She hadn't cried, or even trembled—she'd listened with an ashen face, walked up to her dormitory without a word, and come back wearing jeans and boots and a heavy coat, her wand clenched in her hand. "*Give me your Invisibility Cloak*," she'd said in a wooden voice. "*Now.*"

"*I'm going with you. But we don't know where—*" Harry had doubled over in agony before finishing his sentence, his scar exploding with white-hot pain. The explosion had been followed by the sound of cold laughter—Ron's strangled yelling—the vision of a large, ornate room with a reflecting marble floor and massive wizard portraits moving on the walls—and then blackness. Harry had passed out.

"*Harry—get up—please, please get up—*"

Not sure how long he had been unconscious, Harry had pushed himself onto his elbows and Hermione had pulled him the rest of the way to his feet, already holding his Invisibility Cloak.

"*I know where Ron is,*" he'd told her. "*I saw the room—my scar—*"

"*Where. Tell me where.*" Hermione had brooked no extra words, no waste of time. She had been pulling her hair back into a tight knot and pushing up her sleeves.

"*I don't know, but I know what it looks like—it's a mansion. Huge room, marble floors, wizarding portraits. I've never seen... it could be... where Voldemort killed that man—Frank Bryce. But not the same room.*"

"I don't know, but there are books of interiors—famous wizarding houses—Bryce didn't work in a wizarding house, did he, that was Riddle's house, that's not it. What color were the walls?"

"I... it's fading." Harry remembered his extreme panic as the wispy fragments of his vision had slipped irretrievably away from him... a little at a time...

"NO. DON'T YOU FORGET." Hermione's eyes had frightened him. *"Hurry."* She had rushed through the portrait hole and had fled toward the library, still calling out instructions. *"Hurry, Harry—you have to show me which picture it is—"* She had disappeared under a swirl of silvery cloak, and Harry had bolted after her.

It wasn't the most horrifying part of the memory, but it was bad enough, and it intensified with every Dementor's appearance. Harry cast a Patronus at one point, just to drive the demons out—he thought of last night, holding onto Ginny, and the silvery stag leapt full-force from the tip of his wand, clearing his mind for a long moment. Burke questioned him at once.

"You're not supposed to be feeling the Dementors' effects, through the dragon's energy," Burke said, concern evident in his tone. "Are they getting to you, Harry?"

"No," Harry lied. "I was just practicing."

The end of his shift was a welcome relief; Harry landed Norbert in the midst of the dragon handlers, dismounted, and listened dully as Mick and Charlie discussed something about scheduling.

"D'you mind if I switch to the day shift?" Mick was saying.

"What for?" Charlie seemed surprised; he paused with one sleeve of his jacket still dangling to his side and looked curiously at Mick.

"Oh... no reason," Mick said, turning away and quickly pulling on his headgear. "Just—you know, I was thinking it might make more sense to have one of us on that shift, rather than three new riders together."

"I guess that's true..." Charlie trailed off and looked to his right. Cho was standing a few yards away from them, pinning her fringe out of her face.

"Great." Mick grinned. "I'll talk to the day shift and ask who's willing to switch, shall I?"

"Sure," Charlie said absently. "But you can't switch till next week. This week we've got to ride the relief shifts."

"Right."

Harry stopped listening; he walked towards Cho, who was working her headgear over her hair.

"You're riding your own shifts *and* theirs?" Harry asked, jabbing his thumb at Burke.

"Just while you train," Cho answered. "And don't worry, Harry, fourteen hours is nothing for us. We got used to a lot worse, during the war." She snapped the chin guard into place. "I can sleep with my eyes open," she said with a smile. "Can't I, Charlie?"

Charlie handed her a fireproof jacket. "You can, at that," he said admiringly.

Cho stretched her arms into the jacket; as she did so, her shirt came up a little, revealing a tattoo that circled her navel. Harry's eyes fixed on it for a second before it disappeared, and thought he'd seen a dragon, breathing blue fire.

"Swedish Short-Snout," Cho confirmed, following Harry's gaze and tapping her belly. "Enchanted. And don't let Charlie pretend that he started the trend. I had mine first."

She got easily onto her dragon and took off for Azkaban, flanked by Charlie and Mick. On Harry's right, Viktor was dismounting. On his left, Malfoy was complaining to the keepers about the condition of Mordor's trough. Harry didn't care what was happening. He let the keepers lead Norbert away, concentrated hard through his exhaustion, and Disapparated.

His bedroom appeared around him. It was dark. Ron wasn't there. Harry got out of his heavy gear and into comfortable clothes, and just as he finished dressing again there was a knock on the door.

"Harry, it's me."

Harry sat on the edge of his bed, his mind so muddled that he hardly felt relief at the sound of Ginny's voice. He could still see Hermione's ashen face, and in the back of his mind, like a reel had been looped there, he heard the dim echo of his mother's final screams.

"Harry?" Ginny called softly. "Are you asleep?"

"No, come in," he said quickly. He didn't want her to leave. He wanted yesterday to happen all over again—if he could just get the voices out of his head, and the weight off of his heart—he wanted that closeness.

The door opened and Ginny slipped in; her face was shadowed, but the hall light shone behind her, making the edge of her hair glow. She shut the door, came to sit beside him, and took his hands. At once, he felt a weight drop from his mind. This was better. It would be all right. "Did you

fly today?" she asked.

Harry nodded, and let his forehead fall against hers, too drained to remember his shyness. Their noses brushed. "But I'm all right," he told her, shifting to lay his head down on her shoulder. "I'm all right." For once, it was true. He was feeling much better now that he had her close. Better wasn't the word, though... Harry couldn't place the feeling.

Ginny took one of her hands out of his, and used it to touch his neck, rubbing her fingertips into the hairline at his nape. He leaned more heavily against her, forgetting to keep a bit of himself in check. Against her body, Harry relaxed entirely.

"Good," Ginny whispered, and played her hand over his collar, down his spine. He made a noise to let her know he liked it, and pressed to get as close to her as he could. He found that the closer he was, the better he felt. He dropped her other hand and slipped both arms around her waist, then turned his face to her neck and drew a deep breath. Her hair smelled good. Like... pine, or something. Something steady and clean.

"You're cold," Ginny mumbled suddenly, feeling his neck with the back of her hand. "How close did you get to the Dementors?" But it seemed she already knew the answer. Her body trembled, and Harry held her tighter.

"Close enough," he muttered, realizing that he really *was* freezing—it was especially apparent in contrast to her body's heat. He tightened his arms around her, and she hugged him close, making him... *Safe*. That was the feeling he hadn't been able to name. Nothing could touch him here, except her.

"Charlie told me that they'd be knocked back from a distance," she said angrily. "You shouldn't have to feel them at all."

"It wasn't too bad," Harry said, but Ginny made a noise of disbelief.

"You heard voices," she said. "I know just how that feels. Don't try telling me it wasn't too bad."

Harry pulled away and gazed at her. He'd forgotten that Ginny had experienced Dementors, just as he had. He knew she had horrors in her past, just as he did. Some of them were the same horrors, and some were her own. Tom Riddle still got into her dreams, and Harry wondered just how deeply that diary was rooted in her mind.

"Lie down," she whispered suddenly, and pushed him towards the pillows. Harry glanced worriedly at the door, but didn't fight—Ron and Hermione had subjected him to their affection once or twice, and if Ron walked in, he could damn well walk right back out, because this was too good to stop. He stretched out on his bed and looked up into Ginny's face.

"Ron's at the pub," she said, as if reading his thoughts. She gave him a smile that crinkled the corners of her brown eyes, and Harry had to smile back. She had such pretty eyes, and they always seemed to be saying something that only belonged to him. Even in her childhood, her eyes had been that way. Something bittersweet pricked at Harry's heart; he reached up a hand and gently touched her face to be sure she was there.

Ginny's face lit up and she caressed his fingers, then took his hand and put it back down on the bed. "You have to lie still."

"All right. But what are you—"

"Shhh." She knelt up beside him and reached her hands over him, resting one palm on each of his shoulders. Harry looked up at her, dazed; when she leaned forward like that, her shirt gaped slightly from her body, and he was surprised to see that her freckles continued their light pattern down beyond the V of her neckline. He realized he was staring, and tried to look at her hair, instead—the way it fell along the sides of her face. Her forehead wrinkled in concentration. "Shut your eyes, Harry."

Harry did so, glad of the reprieve. His breath was quick and shallow. It was hard to believe that they'd waited so long to touch each other; he couldn't remember why it had seemed so hard. It was easy. Her hands were on him... moving... he shuddered when she stroked the sides of his neck in a deliberate, almost studied manner, and drew her fingers across the expanse of his shoulders, to the tops of his arms. She hesitated, then brought her fingertips lightly across the top of his chest until they rested just under his collarbone.

Harry realized his hands were in fists. He uncurled them on the mattress, feeling compelled to open up. "Ginny," he whispered, and forgot to shut his mouth. It stayed parted in shock and pleasure as she continued to touch him, moving her hands along his torso. His day at Azkaban was slipping away—this was driving it out—there was nothing in his head now but sensation... and a feverish desire to reciprocate. He had to touch her like this. One of Ginny's hands paused just over his heart; she pressed down, took a ragged breath, and Harry felt the sudden pressure of her face against his neck, her mouth pressed on his skin. She murmured his name and her voice broke.

Sheer, unbearable heat shot through Harry. This was entirely different to what he had felt last

night—this was not gentle—he had to get her as close as possible. He tunneled his fingers into Ginny's hair, curled his hands around the back of her head, and brought her mouth to his. Her lips parted uncertainly, but last night's hesitant kiss was not what Harry had in mind. His tongue tangled needfully with hers. She moaned and dropped her weight onto his chest, and he rolled her onto her back with athletic speed, pinning her beneath him. This was instinct. This was flying. All the darkness of the day was long gone; Harry couldn't remember ever having felt so light. He made a low noise straight into Ginny, pressed harder against her mouth, and began to move his hands on her in the way she'd moved hers on him.

Ginny cried out against him and turned her face away with sudden violence. Harry opened his eyes, stricken.

"What is it?" he demanded, terrified that he'd pushed too far. He rolled instantly off of her, giving her space, feeling like a total ass.

Her face was white and she held herself around the middle with both arms. "I don't know," she answered, wincing. "I think—I'm sick—" She rolled onto her side and contracted into a tight ball, and Harry scrambled to his feet in alarm.

"What do you need? I'll get someone—"

"No-no." Ginny managed to straighten out, though it looked like painful work. "Don't go, I'm fine—I'm fine." Her eyes were shut tight, and it seemed she was forcing herself to take long, slow breaths. "I'm fine."

But Harry was an expert in being fine, and he knew that Ginny wasn't. He also knew that whatever was wrong with her, he'd somehow brought it on. "I'm sorry if—if I—hurt you—" he stumbled, embarrassment flooding him. He pushed up his glasses. "I shouldn't have—I didn't mean—"

"It wasn't you," Ginny said vehemently, opening her eyes. "I'm sick, that's all. I'm...dizzy." She tried to get up, and Harry went to her at once, putting an arm under her shoulders and guiding her to her own room. He couldn't shake the feeling that he'd done this to her—she'd been perfectly healthy until he'd jumped on her so uncontrollably. "It's not you," she repeated, before dropping down to sit on her own bed, still holding her stomach. "Really, Harry, you didn't hurt me..." she faltered, looking very much as if she wanted to explain something. "That is, *I* started it—I shouldn't've thought—but I was only *trying* to... and then it just... oh, never mind." She gave up explaining and blushed deeply. "It was nice."

Harry went red at the implication, but was otherwise extremely relieved. "I'll get you some water and bring your dinner up here, all right?" he said, needing to do something for her.

"All right," she agreed, still looking very pale, but also rather pleased at his offer. Harry fumbled around in her dresser before leaving, trying to find her pajamas for her. He wanted to take care of her properly—but slammed the first drawer shut as soon as he opened it. Those hadn't been pajamas.

"Bottom drawer," Ginny said, her eyes bright. She sounded like she was trying not to laugh, and Harry envied her for being so unembarrassed.

He found a nightdress and put it in her lap. "Be right back," he said, feeling half-stupid and half-wonderful. More than half-wonderful. It was amazing how an hour with Ginny cleared his mind of everything else. He kissed the top of her head on impulse, and though she didn't let go of her stomach, she gave a little satisfied hum. "Be right back."

* * * * *

Hermione sat with her legs crossed and her eyes shut, hands resting palms-up on her knees. A soft, warm breeze played in her hair and she worked to clear her mind of every thought—every impulse. *I miss Ron. I wonder if Harry's all right. I wish I had my books at night; I've hardly been able to sleep. I haven't seen my parents in almost a month... I wonder if they even miss me...*

"My mind keeps wandering," she said, opening her eyes in frustration. Delia sat across from her in trance-like silence, hardly even breathing. Her yoga pose reminded Hermione of a mid-morning New Age exercise program she'd often seen while flicking through the telly channels over the summers, and she'd always found New Age to be more irritating than fascinating. Delia was much more normal than, say, Professor Trelawney, but Hermione couldn't shake the feeling that Thinking was really just an offshoot of Divination, in disguise. "Honestly, how am I supposed to think of just *nothing*? It's all we've done for three weeks, and you still haven't told me the *point*."

Delia didn't answer right away—she rarely allowed interruptions to faze her—and Hermione shut her eyes again with a little growl. She was sick of sitting still. It was one thing to sit in a chair with a stack of books to thumb through or a diary to write in—*that* she could do nonstop. But this endless quiet, devoid of concrete information, was driving her out of her mind. It had taken her a week just to learn to sit properly, and her hips were still sore from the effort.

"Your mind will fix on thoughts," Delia finally said, and Hermione opened her eyes to find her mentor smiling serenely at her. "With practice, you will learn to acknowledge thoughts, and let them pass. Teach your mind to stay free—not to linger."

"I'm trying," Hermione muttered, shutting her eyes again and seeing Ron, as usual, followed by the prone bodies of her parents. "But I can't."

"Can't means won't," Delia answered.

"No," Hermione snapped, "it means *can't*." She uncrossed her legs and stretched them out in front of her on the great, tiled patio that served as a meditation space. It was a perfect day; a lovely wind whispered between the pillars, and beyond the covered patio and the sunlit garden, Hermione watched the sea roll in and out.

"Perhaps a break," Delia said, after a tense pause. She reached for her wand and Summoned a platter heaped with fruit and goblets of sparkling water. Hermione eyed it dubiously. She rather missed plain old boring English tea. Delia smiled a little, raised her wand once more, and a second tray landed between them; this one bore a teapot, cup and saucer.

"Thank you," Hermione said, feeling a little guilty. She reached for the cup, wishing she had kept her temper. "I keep waiting for you to send me back," she said, glancing up at Delia.

"Why would I do that?"

"Because I've got a mundane aura," Hermione muttered unthinkingly, and was startled when Delia let out a clear, free laugh.

"A *what*?"

"Oh nothing," Hermione blushed. "A teacher once told me that. I just haven't got this kind of..." She gestured around at the beauty of the day and the emptiness of the space, painfully aware of the lack of library. "I don't know. I guess I'm just book-smart." She fidgeted. "I think I might be wasting your time."

"How?" Delia picked up an orange and began to peel it, looking unconcerned by Hermione's self-doubt.

"Well... I'm sure there must be someone who has a natural aptitude for this. You could have a much better-suited apprentice."

"Perhaps," Delia agreed, offering Hermione an orange segment. "But *you* are here. There's very little I can do with a talented student who chooses to pursue life elsewhere."

Hermione shook her head at the offered fruit, and turned the teacup around in her hands, swirling the tea, and watching the little leaves drift into shapeless, meaningless patterns. "I may be here for the wrong reasons," she said softly. "I have to admit, I don't really understand what it is we're doing, and the longer we do it, the more I want to give it up."

Delia nodded. She put down the orange and folded her hands. "Are you ready to tell me why you've come?"

Hermione looked away. Delia hadn't asked that before, and the truth was, she didn't want to answer. But she had never had such a difficult time learning anything—not since Divination had she felt so powerless—and it was much harder on her spirit than she was admitting. What did it matter if she'd always made top marks, when she was failing at the one thing she *needed* to learn? Even in her letters to Ron, she didn't confess the truth: since arriving in Cortona, she'd become convinced that she had made the wrong decision. The fact that the island was paradise only made her more depressed. Everything worthwhile was a thousand miles away. Perhaps... if she told Delia everything... then Delia could tell her whether or not it was right to continue on as her apprentice.

"I had loads of job offers," Hermione said, not sure where to begin. "I wouldn't have had to apprentice, and there were a couple of positions I would have been very right for—I could have worked almost anywhere in England's Ministry." She cleared her throat, embarrassed. "I don't say that to be conceited. It's partly because my boyfriend's father is the Minister." She laughed a little.

"I've had a letter about your abilities, Hermione. I'm aware of your intellectual achievements, and I know what avenues were open to you."

"Who wrote to you?" Hermione asked curiously, flushing with pleasure at the words. She needed to hear that she was smart, just now. She certainly didn't feel it.

"Your Headmistress. She thinks very highly of you—I've rarely read such praise."

Hermione swelled with pride. Praise from Professor McGonagall was a rare and treasured thing. "Did she by any chance mention my parents?" she asked quickly, hoping that the answer would be yes, sparing her a painful explanation.

"Yes." Delia drank from her goblet and breathed out; her dark eyes were gently fixed on Hermione's face. "But I need for *you* to tell me."

Hermione's heart sank. She pulled her knees under her chin and wrapped her arms around her

legs, noting absently how tan her skin was, against the loose white robes. Ron would like that. Ron was much too far away.

"Hermione?"

"Christmas of my sixth year," she said abruptly, deciding to get it over with. "I stayed at school to watch over Harry, and while I was having a snowball fight, Death Eaters were torturing my parents." Hermione's nose stung and her eyes watered. "I went home and there were these horrible scorch marks on the walls. The Christmas tree was burnt to ashes, my mother's china cabinet had been smashed through, and in the library... there were fingernail marks... in the arms of the chair where Mum used to sit and read. Deep fingernail marks." The ocean rolled in and out. Hermione followed it with her eyes, trying not to remember too clearly. "My room was obliterated, of course. Someone had burnt 'Mudblood' across my Hogwarts letter, not that I cared about it at that point." Hermione rocked back and forth in rhythm with the sea, pretending Ron was holding onto her. She wanted Ron. "My parents had already been taken to Muggle hospital, but I sneaked them out and raised hell until St. Mungo's let them in. They're still there. Their eyes are wide open and they don't respond to anything. I used to visit all the time, but this summer I could hardly make myself go once."

Delia sat perfectly still, listening, and Hermione was grateful. Questions would have made it impossible.

"I have a friend—Neville Longbottom—his parents were destroyed by Cruciatus long ago, but they were wizards and they were able to fight. Their makeup is different, somehow. They're quite mad, but they walk about and talk to Neville when he visits—they don't recognize him, but they... oh, I don't know what's worse. My parents just lie there with their eyes open." Hermione stopped fighting and let the tears fall. "They're still so frightened, I can see how terrified they were when the Death Eaters hurt them, it's in their eyes, and their eyes don't close, and no one can help them—but I thought if I could be a Thinker, then I could build a cure—" Hermione wiped her eyes and let out a self-deprecating laugh that quickly became a sob. "I can't even clear my mind for ten seconds—"

But she was finished talking. She gave up and sobbed into her knees, hugging her legs for comfort; Delia moved closer and placed a cool hand on the back of her neck until she had cried herself out. It took a long time.

"Better?" Delia asked softly.

Oddly, it was. Hermione felt wrecked, but free of some dark, awful pressure. "I haven't cried in a long time," she sniffled. "Not like that."

"Tears are a gift." Delia lifted her hand from Hermione's neck and offered her water. "Tears unblock, they cleanse and create space. Dry your eyes, child, and sit up again when you are ready."

Hermione did so, setting down the goblet and resuming her meditative position. She shut her eyes. And this time there was no Ron, there were no bodies. There was only open space.

"Let go, Hermione. Don't concentrate. Just let go."

Two hours later, after her first successful meditation, Hermione ate a quiet dinner with Delia. Her heart was lighter and she felt hopeful, not to mention properly hungry for the first time in three weeks.

"Sleep well," Delia told her, touching Hermione's bare shoulder before going to the opposite end of the enormous house. "And happy birthday."

Hermione blinked. She had completely forgotten. "I'm eighteen," she whispered to herself, watching Delia disappear around a column and down another corridor. Stunned that she could have forgotten her own birthday, she went into her bedroom and gasped in delight at the sight that greeted her.

By her bed there was a fantastic explosion of tropical flowers—Delia must have done that. There were also four owls—Hedwig, Pig, a Hogwarts one and one from the Ministry of Magic—all ruffling their feathers and fighting for her attention.

"Oh, Ron," Hermione breathed, cupping Pig in her hands and kissing his ruffled head. He cooed. She detached Ron's gift first, but decided to save it—there were others to open.

Molly Weasley had sent mince pies, photographs of Leo, and a sun hat with a wide, straw brim: "*Don't burn yourself to a crisp, dear. We miss you. Happy birthday.*" Professor McGonagall surprised her with a short card and a scroll from the International Cooperation of Magical Education, who had named Hermione their International Valedictorian of 1998. She squealed, jumped up and down, and wished that Ron were there to torment her about it. Sirius and Remus had sent cards with Hedwig, and Harry had sent a small tub of Fortescue's Ever Frozen Strawberry and Peanut Butter Ice Cream with the note: "*Happy Birthday. I have no idea what you're doing out there, but if you're homesick, this might remind you of Diagon Alley. Miss you.*" Hermione took an enormous bite and reveled in the sugar-rush before opening a lovely, newsy letter from Ginny, which made her forget

the ice cream altogether.

"It's finally happening with Harry and me,"

Ginny had written simply,

"and you know how that feels. I haven't got the words."

Hermione's eyes filled with tears for Ginny, and she felt oddly proud of Harry. It was about time. She wished she could be home to see what it was like, with them together.

"In other news: Ron and Harry moved down the street to the Notch and now they fancy themselves stylish bachelors or something. No furniture and no dishes—it's not exactly style, is it? I stopped by last weekend, but there were clothes on the floor in every room, so I'm not going back until it's livable. Ron says they haven't had time to unpack properly. I say they're pigs."

Hermione rolled her eyes. She could only imagine what havoc those two were wreaking on their own space.

So we're all doing well. I'm rather tired, but I can't complain when I see what Harry does every day. Ron's been hobnobbing about London with Sirius, and every time he catches me doing my schoolwork he says he's reminded of you, and then he prattles on about you for two to six hours. Remus still trusts me with the Wolfsbane Potion, which I have been brewing all week. The full moon is tomorrow and he's not even nervous—I love having him for my teacher. Sirius is all right, I suppose—he skulks about the house, muttering on about Death Eaters and Dementors and dragons and Dark Lords and Draco and other things beginning with D."

Hermione laughed. "Dursleys," she added aloud. When she had finished Ginny's letter, she laid it aside and her heart gave an excited little leap.

Ron had sent something small and square... No, Hermione realized as she tore off the brown paper; Ron had sent *three* small, flat, square things, which were tied together. Picture frames. She picked up the first one and went into a laughing fit; Ron had got someone—Harry, most likely—to take a picture of him with Crookshanks in one arm, and *Hogwarts, A History* in the other. "See how good I'm being?" his note read. "All I do is pet the cat and broaden my mind. I love you." The photo-Ron wagged his eyebrows at her, making her giggle again. "I love you," she said back, as if he could hear her, and picked up the second photo.

Her heart melted. It was another one of Ron, but this time he was holding baby Leo, and his smile was tender and proud. The baby was sucking on the tip of his index finger, and Ron's ears were pink with happiness. "I really love you," Hermione whispered, kissing the picture. She couldn't help imagining Ron as a father, looking at him with his nephew. But that was a long way off, she supposed, because it was a bit more difficult to imagine herself as a mother.

When she picked up the third photograph, tears came into her eyes. It was a picture from summertime—Colin must have taken it. It was a black and white of her and Ron from the shoulders up, grinning. She was tan, and he was freckled, and they looked blissfully happy, with her head leaned against him, and his arm snug around her. When their picture-selves turned to each other and kissed, Hermione blushed to see how unreserved she was. She hoped her image hadn't done that in front of Colin.

She set the pictures up on her bedside table, gazed at them for a happy moment, then moved on and read Ron's card.

"Happy Birthday to my Head Girl."

Hermione giggled.

"If I told you how much I miss you, I'd sound like a sap. Of course, since it's your birthday, I guess that's in order."

Ron elaborated further, in a paragraph that made Hermione sigh, and blush, and sigh again. She read it a dozen times, and then continued on to more prosaic topics, her heart still fluttering.

"I've been giving Sirius a little help with his trials during the daytime, when I'm not at the pub. I don't help much, because I don't know enough, but I try to take the details off his hands. He's looking a little more rested, and I can tell Remus is glad I'm doing it, even if Sirius hardly seems to notice. He's insane. He might not be a madman, but he's still a mental case, I'm telling you. And speaking of mental cases, one Draco Malfoy can kiss my royal arse if he thinks he's got a thing to go on, in court. Sirius and I have been digging through our stuff for the trial, and it turns out that I could probably press charges in return, if I really wanted to, for a little thing called Defamation of Character. Ha! How do you like that! He's been defaming my character for about seven years, so if this law's retroactive, then I think I'd like to put him away for the next century. Or just until he's too old to breathe. Dirty wanker."

Hermione grinned in spite of herself, and was extremely relieved to hear that the trial preparations were going so well. It was hard not to be at home helping, but she was doing her best not to panic. And it was rather... interesting... to imagine Ron helping Sirius at court. She toyed with that image for a little while, lying down on her bed and curling on her side before continuing to read.

"So I'm doing fine, I suppose. But you sound sad, in your letters. You think you've got me fooled with your 'I'm learning SO much and it's SO lovely and I could just write TEN papers about it', but I'm not as stupid as I look, Miss Granger. Your assignment: one letter, on my pillow, tomorrow morning. Three feet of parchment, and ten points off for every inch it's missing. And no fair writing really big—that's my trick and you can't have it. Keep Pig till it's done."

He really knew her. Hermione shut her eyes and sighed, vainly hoping that Ron would Apparate into her room and hold her, just for a minute. When he didn't, she read the last of his letter.

*"Send all future correspondence to The Notch, though, because as of last weekend, Harry and I are officially bachelors. Well. We live alone, anyway.
I love you more than is strictly decent.
-Ron"*

There was a postscript, so tender in nature that it made Hermione want to Apparate home—she felt a full sort of warmth as she changed into a light nightdress and sat down at her desk with Ron's letter. She would write everyone else back tomorrow—but tonight, as a birthday gift to herself, she would only write to Ron.

She read the loving parts of his letter again several times, glancing over at the pictures on her bedside table to watch as Ron's image nuzzled hers—Hermione closed her eyes, craving the actual sensation. Three more months without him seemed impossible. Not for the first time, she let her mind travel back over the details of their last night together and, when she could no longer stand it, she picked up her quill and began to write.

She lay down the quill an hour later, hot in the face and breathing rather heavily. She couldn't reread what she'd written, or she'd never send it. It was totally honest and so full of adoring, intimate remarks that Hermione was seized by a fit of nerves after tying it to Pig's ankle—she snatched it back and very nearly tore it to pieces. But in the end, she let Pig have it, and when the little owl was irretrievably gone, Hermione climbed into bed feeling scarlet all over—even though it was *Ron*, it felt weird to put such personal things on paper.

But it was also strangely exciting. Hermione hugged her pillow, her pulse racing as she imagined him reading what she'd written. Would he be shocked? Would he write back?

Oh, he'll write back, said a knowing voice in the back of her head. Hermione fell asleep, grinning a bit wickedly.

* * * * *

Ron sighed and stretched and wrapped his arms and legs around Hermione, who was doing something terrific to the spot just under his ear. He muttered something fairly indecent to her and she laughed and pressed against him. He could feel the whole shape of her through her clothes, but it wasn't enough—the clothes were unacceptable—he trailed his hands down her sides and over her hips—

"Hey, get up."

Ron groaned, and swatted at the hand that was shaking his shoulder. "Geroff," he mumbled to the unwelcome intruder, trying to get back to Hermione—but she was quickly slipping away.

The intruder shook him again. "Come on, last week you said you wanted to go to London early for this. You told me to wake you up on my way out." The voice paused, and then its owner gave Ron's arm a swift thump.

"Ow—damn!"

"Get up. I've got to go and I want to be sure you're awake."

Ron gave up on finding Hermione again; she had disappeared into a lost dream. He opened his eyes and glared blearily up at Harry, then glanced at his clock. "It's five bollocking thirty..." he moaned, unable to believe there *was* such an hour. "Go away. Go back to bed."

"Can't. I have to go to Azkaban now and put in half a shift so I can get out early and give you moral support at the trial."

Trial. Ron sat bolt upright. "It's today," he muttered. Between his night shifts at the pub, his daily work with Sirius—and the incredibly distracting letter that had come from Cortona yesterday afternoon—Ron had rather lost track of time. He swung his legs out of bed and waited for some pre-trial nerves to hit, but perhaps it was just too early for nerves. All he could think about was what Hermione must look like—all tan in that white thing she'd described. He wondered if he was allowed to show up at the Thinker's house and find out. He had to reply to Hermione's letter and ask. He *really* had to write back...

"See you at the Ministry." Harry's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Oh—right. Hey, thanks for coming."

Harry snorted softly. "Like I wouldn't," he said, and Disapparated.

Ron had half a mind to go right back to sleep and try to find that dream again. But even though he didn't have to be in Diagon Alley until the afternoon, he knew there was a good chance he'd sleep right through his trial if he went back to bed. He glanced around his new room and considered that he could spend a few hours making it look respectable—there was a mess of books at one end and a mess of clothes at the other, and a few simple spells would organize all of it. There were also about a thousand Chudley Cannons posters to hang... not that it would be much fun to stare at those, this season. Frowning, Ron decided to ignore the disarray of the Notch, for the time being. It was his. He was paying for half of it. And he'd make an enormous mess if he felt like it.

Cheered by the thought of never having to clean anything again for the rest of his life, Ron got dressed and made himself breakfast, rehearsing in his head the many questions and answers that he and Sirius had planned for his defense. Sirius had also played devil's advocate during their preparation by antagonizing Ron with pointed personal remarks, as Malfoy's representative probably would. Oddly, Ron had rather enjoyed all the practicing, and he was going to miss hanging out with Sirius during the day. There was something satisfying about helping with the really big trials, even when Sirius asked him do really mundane searches of huge piles of parchment.

At eight-thirty, when he was dressed and nearly ready to leave, Ginny showed up with rings under her eyes, and hugged him. "It's going to be fine," she said fiercely. "I'll be up there. I think the twins are coming, too."

Ron hugged her back, and tugged her ponytail. "Thanks," he said, noting how pale she was. She'd been looking tired a lot, lately. "You look like someone hexed you right in the face."

"Oh, *thanks*. I need more sleep, that's all."

"*Harry* been keeping you awake?" Ron taunted. Lately, Harry had made very little effort to hide his regard for Ginny, and he'd spent more of his evenings at Lupin Lodge than at the Notch. Ron hadn't felt quite comfortable taunting *him* about this, but Ginny was another matter.

Ginny went red, and smacked his arm. "No. It was a full moon last night, if you didn't notice, and I had to take care of Sirius."

"Don't you mean Remus?"

"No, Remus was fine. When are you leaving for London?"

"In a minute. Bill wants to give me an early pep talk, or something."

"Oh, I wish I could go."

"Too bad you have *school*." Ron grinned. "Though I can't imagine Remus is up to teaching today."

"He's not, but I promised to study independently," Ginny groaned. "I'll see you up there," she said, and when she had left the Notch, Ron Disapparated, still feeling perfectly at ease.

It wasn't until Diagon Alley appeared around him in a rush, full of loud noises and colorfully dressed wizards and witches, that he felt the first onrush of fear. Ron peered in the direction of the Ministry, his heart pounding a bit harder than usual. The trial would really happen today. And Malfoy was really out to get him. Ron dropped down to sit on the Gringotts steps, and dangled his arms over his knees, waiting for Bill and trying not to panic.

"Got a Knut?"

Ron's head swiveled toward the voice, which sounded very odd. It was young and clear as a bell, yet twisted somehow. Hardened. But he didn't see anyone.

"Who said that?" he asked, and peered left towards the disembodied voice. Behind a massive white column on the side of the steps, Ron could barely see a small figure with sandy hair. It half-emerged to glare at him.

Ron gaped. The voice belonged to a boy. But the boy was dirty and disheveled and the gleam in his eyes was unnatural for a child of his age. He gripped the side of the column with one grimy hand and jerked his head at Ron.

"Spare a Knut, I said."

"I..." Ron reached for his moneybag. But something stopped him from offering change; he felt a compulsion to do something else. "Where're your parents?" he asked, looking around.

"Dead."

Ron felt pity pierce him like an arrow. "Voldemort?" he asked softly.

The boy tossed his head and his blue eyes flashed. "I wasn't there, was I? I wouldn't know. I was at school, and then people tried to stick me in that dirty Children's Home, so I ran for it. Damned if I'll let those bastards tell me—"

"Hey, there," Ron heard himself saying gently, getting to his feet, "watch the swearing." He smiled inwardly; Hermione would faint if she could hear him say that.

The boy, however, did not smile. He was backing away from Ron. "Don't you tell me what to do—and sit down, don't come near me."

"How can I give you the Knut, if I stay over here?" Ron asked casually, holding one out between his thumb and forefinger.

The boy stopped, obviously thinking hard about this. "You're going to give it to me?"

"On my honor. If—" Ron paused. "If you sit here a minute first and answer some questions." He held the boy's gaze, not knowing why he didn't just give the kid some money. He only knew, looking at the orphan before him, that his own troubles suddenly seemed very far away. As a child, he'd always felt conspicuously poor—but to live on the street, to be covered with filth, to have to ask strangers for money enough to eat... it was unthinkable.

The boy was considering him, calculating. "On your honor?"

Ron crossed his heart.

The boy smirked. "Like that means anything anymore," he muttered.

"It does with me," Ron said seriously. He waited, watching the boy's expression change from bitterness, to disbelief, to defensive curiosity. He took one, then two steps closer.

"How many questions do I have to answer?"

"Well, let's say three. Here's one—how old are you?"

"Twelve."

Ron's heart ached. This boy should be starting his second year in school, yet here he was. Ron remembered the summer after he had turned twelve. He had returned to the Burrow and complained about how hot it was, and how boring. He had spent most of the time telling Ginny about Harry, and then telling her to shut up about Harry, making fun of Percy, and fishing tadpoles out of his soup, courtesy of Fred and George. He'd busted Harry out of the Dursleys' in a flying car, and he'd written Hermione taunting letters. They'd gone back to school in that car—crashed into the Whomping Willow—got in horrible trouble. It had been wonderful. This boy, on the other hand, looked as far from wonderful as it was possible to be.

"All right," he said, forcing his voice to stay even. "Where have you been sleeping?"

The boy blinked, and his face closed off again. "I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"You'll turn us in."

Us. Then there were more of them. Ron shook his head. "I never would."

Something about him must have been convincing. The boy crossed his arms. "You do and I'll get you."

"Fair enough."

"Cellar down Knockturn Alley. That's all I'm saying. And you've only got one more question." The boy leapt down three steps at once, swaggered insolently up to Ron and held his hand out, palm-up. "Ask it," he said.

Ron was reminded fiercely of two people. The first was Draco Malfoy; this boy's attitude could have doubled for his and Ron was tempted to ask if the Malfoys were any relation. But the second was Harry. The boy's demeanor was as self-sufficient as Harry's—he was twelve, frightened, and

parentless because of Voldemort. Ron thought hard about his third question, wondering how much he could make of it.

"I trust you," he said, crouching down to look the boy dead in the eyes, "so I'm giving you this now. But I know you'll stay for the third question, and I know you'll answer it honestly." He put the Knut in the boy's hand, where small, dirty fingers gripped greedily around it.

The boy gave a narrow laugh. "Slow, aren't you?" he spat, and before Ron could say anything, the boy raced nimbly down the steps and sprinted toward Knockturn Alley.

"I've seen him before." Bill had appeared on the stairs; he pointed at the boy's disappearing back. "Poor kid."

"Yeah," said Ron, feeling rather stupid. He should have asked the boy's name first, not his age. And he shouldn't have trusted him when he'd looked that desperate. "Damn."

"I know, but he won't be helped. He's run away from St. Mungo's—there are a bunch of them that won't stay in the home. It's awful to see." He looked Ron up and down. "Did you bring a change of clothes for your trial?" he asked bluntly.

"What's wrong with these?" Ron gestured defensively to the brown robes he was wearing—they were good enough for work, they were long enough, and they bore no visible stains or patches. At least he wasn't Harry, going about in Gryffindor robes.

"Well, they're not very formal, are they?"

"Malfoy's not my date to the ball," Ron muttered. "I'm not dressing up for him."

"No, but you'd better dress up for the Council," Bill advised in a knowing-elder-brother voice that made Ron want to hit him.

"Fine. I'll go home and get my dress robes."

"Not *dress* robes, Ron. Formal robes. For professional occasions."

Ron snorted. "For your information, I *wear* these to work—sorry if they're not professional enough for your tastes. And you're one to talk, going to work in dragon hide and vests—and keeping a *ponytail*," he added for good measure.

Bill raised his eyebrows, but didn't retort. "Look, I'm just trying to help," he said, less demandingly. "Want to stop by my flat and grab robes of mine?"

"I'm too tall for yours," Ron said, mildly pleased that this was true. He would always be the youngest brother, but he *had* grown up the tallest.

"So we'll go to Madam Malkin's," Bill said easily. "I'll get you some."

"I can get my own." Ron fingered the money pouch in his pocket. His bank vault was much emptier since he'd paid his first month's rent, but he wasn't letting his brothers buy him robes forever. He followed Bill to Madam Malkin's, where he was surprised to see an unfamiliar shopkeeper bustling about between the mannequins.

"I'm Madame Mbaye," the woman said pleasantly, coming towards them. "Don't be shocked, boys, my sister's on holiday and I'm helping her out. Now... what color to put with that nice red hair..." She looked them both over as if contemplating eating them, and Ron blushed. "I've got just the thing," she purred, and disappeared into the back of the shop.

Ron nudged Bill. "She fancies us," he muttered, but Bill wasn't paying attention. His eyes were fixed on something across the shop, and Ron followed his brother's gaze to where it rested on a brilliant, pale sort of light. But it wasn't light at all—it was a sheet of hair. A very beautiful, very familiar sheet of hair.

"Holy crap," Ron mumbled. "Fleur Delacour."

Bill turned on him. "You know her?" he demanded.

"You want an introduction?" Ron asked slyly, and went into a fit of immature laughter. Fleur had that effect on him, he supposed. "Hey," he called out, when he'd got control of himself. "Fleur—hi!"

"Don't!" Bill hissed.

But it was too late; she had turned around, and Ron grinned at Bill's positively purple complexion as Fleur's eyes flitted disdainfully over him, then focused on Ron.

"Ron!" she called in return. "But 'ow nice!" She picked up her purse and shopping bag, and unnecessarily ran a hand over her hair before coming toward him and kissing him on both cheeks. Ron knew he was glowing red, but he didn't care.

"Nice to see you too," he said, as evenly as he could. "This is my brother, Bill—Bill, this is Fleur Delacour. She was the Beauxbatons champion at the Triwizard Tournament."

Fleur acknowledged Bill with a curt nod and returned her full attention to Ron, who felt highly gratified. It was usually the other way around.

"What're you doing in London?" he asked.

"I 'elped your brother Sharlie wiz his dragons, and now I am 'elping wiz enchantments at

Gringotts."

"Ah," Ron said, smiling widely. So Bill *had* seen her before, and hadn't worked up the nerve to talk to her. "Well, you're working with my brother, then. He's a Curse Breaker for the bank. You should show her around, Bill." Ron elbowed his brother in the ribs. "Make a few introductions, give her a tour of Diagon Alley, that sort of thing."

"Oh, I know my way around," Fleur said airily, giving Bill a wide, white, catlike smile. "I do not need 'elp. But," she said, turning back to Ron, "you are terribly sweet." She leaned forward and kissed both Ron's cheeks once more. "I must go. I 'ope we will see each other again—you work in Diagon Alley?"

"He's on trial at the Ministry courthouse," Bill answered, and Ron tensed with embarrassment. He made a note to stop by Fred and George's shop soon, and find something horrible to send to Bill's flat.

But Fleur's Cheshire smile faded; she looked instantly concerned. "You are all right?" she asked Ron, putting a hand on his arm. "Were you accused in ze war?"

Ron stopped glaring at Bill and soaked up Fleur's sympathetic look. "No, it's nothing that serious, but thanks. I'll be fine."

"What is zat?" she asked, frowning at his temple. "Were you 'urt?"

Ron looked blankly at her, then remembered that his temple had been torn open when Malfoy had hit him with the ring. Even though Hermione had treated it properly, it had never really healed. He reached up and felt the scab to make sure it wasn't bleeding. "Nah," he answered. "That's nothing."

Fleur looked relieved. She gave him another winning smile. "Well, ze next time you come by Gringotts, ask for me and we will 'ave lunch."

"Yeah, all right," Ron said, and though he knew he was grinning stupidly, he couldn't stop himself. "I'll bring Harry, if you like."

"Oh! Yes, bring 'Arry. You both..." Fleur trailed off, looking suddenly distant and sad. She shook her lovely head. "You were both very kind to me, at 'Ogwarts," she said quietly. "I 'ave not forgotten it." She went absently towards the door and pushed through it.

"Say hi to Gabrielle for me," Ron called after her, but he wasn't sure if she'd heard. The door swung shut. The next thing he felt was a very un-brotherly punch in the shoulder; Ron hollered in pain, and turned on Bill. "What the hell is wrong with you?" he yelled.

"Her little sister disappeared months ago—" Bill said hotly, baring his teeth like a guard dog. "Gabrielle was abducted from Mont. Ste. Mireille—way to bring it up, you halfwit." He glowered at Ron.

"How was I supposed to know that?" Ron asked angrily, and then stopped. "Wait a minute. How do *you* know?"

Bill went back to looking purple, and said nothing.

"Ohhh..." Ron rubbed the sore spot on his shoulder, suddenly understanding. "Got a thing for her, have you? Done your research on her?"

Bill looked daggers at Ron, but shut his mouth on whatever curse was about to come out of it when Madame Mbaye bustled back into the room with her arms full of fabric.

"Did I hear fighting?" she asked, giving a low, silky laugh. "Now boys, play nice. Here's what I think you ought to be wearing—stunning pattern. Just the thing. Very animal, you know, very *primal*." She held a huge swatch of cloth up to Ron, toga-style. The cloth was orange and blue and brown, decorated with black African-styled patterns, and the whole thing shimmered with gold flecks. "Oh, now that *is* nice," she mused. "Gold brings out that hair of yours *very* nicely."

Ron stepped away from the toga and shook his head. "I just need a set of professional robes," he said quickly. "Blue or black. Or really dark green. Something solid."

"Give him maroon," came a voice from the door. It was Harry, dressed in full dragon riding attire, and looking much older for it. "Hey, Ron. I just saw Fleur and she told me you were here. What did I miss?" Harry looked very tired, and he was rubbing his temples, but he managed to smirk. "Did you ask her out again, or anything?"

"You... asked her out?" Bill said, looking at Ron in disbelief.

"Sure," Ron said, trying to sound like he had once made a practice of dating veela. "Before Hermione and me, of course."

Harry sniggered, but didn't elaborate, and Ron shot him a thankful look.

"Maroon?" Madame Mbaye looked a bit crestfallen. "Well, I suppose I can find something plain..."

"*Not* maroon," Ron corrected in a panic. "Anything else."

The shopkeeper's sister disappeared into the back again with a sigh. She returned with some-

thing she called “military blue” and held it up to Ron. “Well, you *do* make the dull colors look nice,” she finally said, making him blush again. “Anything for your brother, while I’m at it?” Or your friend?” She pointed to Harry. “*That’s* a dashing ensemble, dear,” she said appreciatively. “Very daring. Something else like that, perhaps?”

“Er—plain black robes,” Harry answered. “Two sets.”

Madame Mbaye was finished with the tailoring in a very short time, and Ron changed into his new robes in the dressing area. He checked himself from every angle and puffed up proudly—Bill might have been right about the professional thing. He looked damn good. And it might have been his imagination, but when he, Harry and Bill stepped back out into Diagon Alley, he thought a couple of girls turned to look at him. He wondered what Hermione would think of him, dressed up like this. She’d always glowed whenever he’d worn dress robes for anything, and these were even better somehow. More adult. Ron set his shoulders and drew himself up to his full height.

At the bottom of the Gringotts steps, however, he checked his watch and slumped nervously. Noon. Trial in an hour. His insides fluttered unpleasantly.

“What are you doing all the way over here?” someone cried from halfway down the street. Ron shielded his eyes from a sudden glare of sunlight and saw Ginny hurrying toward them. “I thought you’d be down by the Ministry, by now—I was worried.”

Bill grabbed Ginny and hugged her, lifting her feet off the ground. “Hi, Ginner Pinner,” he said fondly. Ginny shared a private look of disgust with Ron; he raised his eyebrows in sympathy. “Did you get those potions ingredients all right?”

“Yes, it all worked out. Thanks for the help.” When Bill let her go, she stepped close to Harry, who put his arm around her and rested his hand on her waist.

Ron stared. *That* was new. He’d seen them touch now and again at home, but never in public—not that it bothered him so much. Ginny fingered the thick goggles that hung around Harry’s neck, and tugged at the cords that hung out of his vest, all the while asking him questions about his day. Harry answered easily, handing her a pair of Omnioculars so that she could play back a few moments of dragon riding for herself, if she wanted to. He looked amazingly levelheaded for having spent so many days around Dementors, and if Ginny was the person keeping his spirits up, then Ron supposed it was all right. She looked more worn out than Harry did, really.

Bill didn’t seem to notice that his little sister’s love life was developing right in front of his face. He kept looking up the stairs towards the bank as if expecting to see someone. Ron wondered if he was trying to catch another glimpse of Fleur, and realized that he hadn’t really heard what Bill had said earlier. Fleur’s sister... Mont. Ste. Mireille... it was awful. Fleur had been mad about her sister. Ron’s thoughts turned automatically to Percy and he sighed quietly to himself.

“Aw, don’t cry, ickle Ronniekins—we’re here!”

“And we’ve got ammunition.”

Fred and George grinned around at their startled faces. Both their pairs of eyebrows shot up at the sight of Harry’s proximity to Ginny.

“Ammunition?” Ron demanded, hoping to distract them from saying something that would embarrass them all.

The twins turned back to him. “That’s right,” Fred cackled, “our latest—”

“—and greatest brainchild,” finished George, fingering his goatee with the air of a mad scientist.

“Don’t you dare try anything in the courtroom,” Ron began, but Harry looked delighted.

“What is it?”

“A Glumbumble,” George replied, pulling a small, glass jar out of the pocket of his robes and holding it up. Inside it buzzed a flying insect, furry-bodied and gray.

Ron rolled his eyes impatiently. “You hardly invented that,” he said. There was a nest of the things inside one of the hollow trees, near the Burrow.

“Ugh, I used to get stung by those,” Ginny said. “They make you feel sad for days.”

“Ah yes,” Fred said. “They induce melancholy. Make a person slow-witted, depressed, and distracted.”

“Well get it out of here,” Bill said, suddenly coming back to the conversation. “We all need our wits this afternoon.”

“I’ve also brought a few of these,” Fred said cheerfully, pulling a small, clear bag of nettles out of his pocket. “They eat them.”

“So we Banish a few nettles into old Malfoy’s helmet-hair—”

“Release the Glumbumble—”

“And watch him get stung and fail miserably on the stand,” George finished triumphantly.

Fred put a hand over his heart. “It’s a disgrace, how these creatures manage to get into highly-

classified Ministry areas. We'll have to have a word with Dad about security."

"You can't do that," Bill protested.

"It's interfering with the testimony of a witness," Ron added, but he had to admit it was a pretty good idea.

"I'll Banish the nettles," said Harry, taking them from Fred.

"Don't worry," Fred said, smiling at Bill's look of disapproval. "We'll only do this as a last resort."

"You're jeopardizing Dad's position—"

"Oh, let Mum give us the speech, Bill, honestly. She misses it so."

"We've got to go meet Mum, actually," Ginny said, checking her watch. "She wants us all near her in the courtroom."

The Weasley children gave a collective groan.

"I think Penny might be bringing Leo, too," Ginny added, and everyone perked up at that and started walking toward the courthouse. Ron wished he could hold the baby on the stand—maybe he'd get sympathy points. It was bizarre, to think that they were all walking to a trial in which *he* was the accused. He couldn't get used to the idea that there might be consequences for an action that had never been his fault. How helpless Sirius must have felt, when they'd convicted him. Ron shuddered.

"You all right?" Ginny asked quietly, edging close to him. She kept one arm tucked into Harry's, and gave Ron her other one. He took it.

"Fine," he said stiffly, looking around absently, expecting something to appear. He wasn't sure what he was looking for.

"You must miss Hermione," Ginny said, and leaned her head on his shoulder. "I'm sure she's thinking of you."

He'd been looking for Hermione. Ron glanced at Fortescue's as they passed it, and at Ollivander's—he remembered when she'd come with him to get another wand. Everything here was loaded with memories of her. Especially Flourish and Blotts, where the windows were now decorated for autumn, piled high with spell books and fiction. Hermione loved that place. Maybe after the trial, he'd stop in and get her a book to send back with his letter. She hadn't taken any books with her to Cortona—she must be starving for a good read by now—no matter what he sent, she'd probably read it out of desperation. Ron cheered himself up thinking about the different Quidditch periodicals that he could send her. She'd finally know what he was talking about half the time.

They'd reached the bottom of the courthouse steps. Everyone cleared a sort of half circle around Ron, and looked at him with grave, supportive faces.

"Charlie would be here if he could," Bill said. "But he's got to ride Draco's shift. He says you'll be brilliant, all right?"

Ron nodded.

"Good luck," Fred said soberly.

"Clobber him," added George.

"I love you," Ginny said, sounding a little choked up. She hugged him, and Ron reddened. It wasn't often that the Weasley siblings got serious like that. "He hasn't got a chance."

"Malfoy won't win," Harry said flatly, reaching out and clapping Ron's shoulder when Ginny let go. "And if he does, I've brought the Invisibility Cloak." He patted his satchel. "I'll smuggle you out."

Ron tried to smile. Everyone was being really great. But there was only so much they could do to help—this was his problem—and he had a sudden idea of what Harry must have felt like, all through school. Everyone all around, ready to assist with something they couldn't touch. It was a lonely feeling.

"Ron!"

Ron swiveled and looked up the steps; Sirius was bounding down them at top speed, looking haggard but jubilant. His black hair swung in his eyes and he victoriously brandished a scroll of parchment in the air.

"You won't believe what's happened—I almost didn't believe it myself—"

Ron's heart sped up. "What is it?"

"Malfoy's fallen off his dragon and drowned?" Fred asked hopefully.

Ginny glared at him. "That's not funny," she hissed, touching Harry's arm.

"Malfoy," Sirius said, coming to the bottom of the steps and grinning, "has decided to take his representative's advice."

Ron wasn't sure he was hearing things right. "What advice was that?" he asked shakily.

"To drop the charges." Sirius handed Ron the scroll he was holding; Ron unrolled it and scanned

it, holding his breath. It wasn't possible that Malfoy was passing up an opportunity to make him suffer—but here it was, in print, with Malfoy's signature at the bottom. He barely had time to finish reading before Bill grabbed the scroll and read aloud, confirming what Sirius had said.

George and Fred gave a unanimous, earsplitting whoop. Ginny and Harry each grabbed one of Ron's arms and started congratulating him, relief heavy in their voices. Ron barely heard any of it. There was a buzzing disbelief in his brain. Something didn't feel right.

"Really?" he asked Sirius. It wasn't real. It couldn't just be *over*. Malfoy was not the type. "But why?"

"No details, they said, and he won't speak with us—but I reckon he's scared. I had told his representative to make him aware of all our evidence, and to tell him that a further investigation into his personal affairs would follow our countercharges."

"Someone *should* investigate him," Harry said darkly.

Ron fidgeted uneasily. It wasn't a good enough explanation. "So that's... it?" he asked slowly. "I can just—what—go home?"

"Go home!?" George demanded indignantly.

"You're going out with us and celebrating!" Fred declared.

"I'd say that's in order," Bill agreed, rolling up the parchment and handing it back to Sirius. "This is fantastic news. Good on you, Ron. I'll go up and tell Mum—"

"No need," said Sirius. "I got in touch with your mother before she arrived and she was so relieved that she burst into tears." He laughed. "Your dad looked tempted to do the same thing. Oh and Ron—another bit of good news."

The first announcement hadn't sunk in yet, but Ron nodded dazedly at Sirius. "Yeah?"

"The Courtenay trial is over. She was proved innocent this morning—your theory worked out. The same officer assigned every Death Eater she defended—*he's* the one we want. Not Darla. She went home today for the first time in four months."

"One innocent prisoner released," Ron said, vaguely realizing what that must mean to Sirius. "I'm glad to hear it."

"Two in one day, if we count you," Sirius replied, looking younger and more energetic than he had in weeks, which was especially amazing considering that the full moon had been just last night, and he probably hadn't been able to sleep.

"Come on," said Fred. "Leaky Cauldron. Let us memorialize this moment with a few fine butter-beers."

"Well spoken," said George, a smile brightening his face.

"Not the Leaky Cauldron," Ron said, snapping out of his daze. He wasn't going to jail—he didn't even have a monetary fine. Hermione was going to be ecstatic. *He* was ecstatic. His unease evaporated and left him feeling giddy. "London's overpriced, we're going to the Snout's Fair and drinking free." His heart was growing lighter by the second. "Goldie wanted to know the verdict first thing, so he'd know whether to hire another bartender or not." He smiled. "Guess he doesn't have to, poor old man. He's stuck with me. Let's go tell him, Harry."

"Wish I could," Harry said, giving Ron an apologetic look. "But as there's no trial, I should go put in the other half of my shift."

"Oh, can't you stay?" Ginny pled softly. "You should come with us."

"I would, but I don't think Malfoy's going back and it's not fair to..." He looked torn for a moment, but came swiftly to a decision. "I'm sorry, Ron. We'll celebrate later, all right?"

"All right," Ron said, clipping Harry on the arm. "I'll have one for you, in the meantime."

"Thanks." Harry pulled his wand out of a funny pocket on the side of his trouser leg, and glanced at Ginny. She still looked disappointed but, as Ron watched, Harry leaned over and gave her a very quick—but very definite—kiss on the cheek. "See you soon," he said, and hardly had a chance to turn red before Disapparating.

Sirius and Bill both stared at Ginny, their eyes wide. Neither seemed to believe what he had just seen.

"Whoa-ho-ho!" Fred crowed, pointing at her. "Well, it looks like somebody's investment is finally paying *off*!"

"I remember all the words to their first valentine," George chimed in, giving a fake snuffle and wiping at his eyes. "Touching stuff, that. Ahem. His eyeeyes are as greeeen—"

"I'll meet you in Stagsden," Ginny muttered to Ron, red to the roots of her hair. "I have to go by Floo powder—I'll use Dad's office." She turned and raced to the Ministry's steps without looking back.

"Well." Sirius still looked a bit shocked; his eyes followed Ginny until she disappeared. "It's good

that this is all cleared up—if you’ll all excuse me, I need to start working on—”

But Ron didn’t let him finish. “No you don’t,” he said. “You’re coming with us.”

Sirius smiled patiently. “I can’t, I have—”

“Sirius, come *on*. You need a break, and—here, I’ll make you a deal. I’ll help you make up for lost time, I’ll keep on coming up here with you until you’re caught up.” Ron said all of this very fast, and hoped very much that Sirius would agree. Partly because he really did think that the man needed a break—but mostly because he didn’t want to be finished with trial work. He’d looked forward to it every day for weeks, and considering that it meant getting up before sunrise, he supposed it had to mean something that he actually liked it.

Sirius looked like he was about to protest, but gave into the four Weasleys around him, who looked like they might use force if he tried to disagree. “Fine,” he said, “but I’m warning you, if you’re not careful, you won’t have any time left to work at that pub. I’ll wear you out.”

“Fine with me,” Ron said. The busier he was, the less time there would be for missing Hermione. “Let’s go, Ginny’s going to beat us, and I want to be the one to tell Goldie the good news.”

Fred and George moved on either side of Sirius to assure that he Disapparated, and when he did, they followed suit. Bill went next, leaving Ron alone at the bottom of the courthouse steps. He looked up at the massive building, amazed at his luck. It was going to be great, writing to Hermione that the case had been thrown out. It was going to be great writing back to that letter of hers, full stop. She wasn’t the only one who could write like that—he took a moment to imagine a possible response, and her possible reaction.

When Ron Apparated into the Snout’s Fair, his ears were still pink.

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You bunch of total @!.*&##\$`&#&!!!

— CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE —

Devotion to Duty

“Perfect morning for Quidditch!”

Autumn was passing in a blur. It was already the third Saturday of October, and Harry lay on his back on the sofa—the one good piece of furniture he and Ron had acquired—listening to the WWN. It was bizarre, listening to the opening ceremonies of the Quidditch season and knowing that he could have been a part of the excitement. He could have been standing in the team entrance with Oliver and Marty and Firoza and the rest of them, his stomach tangled up in knots, his nerves on edge, clutching his Firebolt in anticipation rather than in dread. He could have heard the crowd around him again.

At least he could have been *in* the crowd; Ron had somehow got himself a pair of tickets to every game, and he’d invited Harry to come with him. But Harry wanted to rest on the one day he didn’t fly a day shift, and it would have been anything but restful to watch Maureen Knight play Seeker. Therefore, Ron had taken Charlie to the match and Harry had stayed at home. He shifted on the sofa, unable to find a comfortable position.

“It’s a privilege to be announcing my first game with you two fine sportswomen—I’m sitting here between Catriona McCormack and Gwendolyn Morgan, who haven’t aged a day since they were players—”

“And how would you know, laddie?” asked a throaty Scottish voice.

“You weren’t born yet,” stated a scratchy Welsh one.

Harry wasn’t sure why he was torturing himself by listening—he might as well have gone to the match—although it was better to concentrate on Quidditch than on the dull ache in his back. Flying Norbert had become almost natural over the past several weeks, but dragon riding still took an entirely different toll on his body than riding a broomstick. He’d expected to become used to his position in the harness, but he hadn’t quite got there yet, and it was wreaking havoc on his spine.

“Or perhaps I’m just getting old,” he said to himself, shifting again, with a grimace.

“Yes, you’re ancient. Soon we’ll have to commit you to a home.” Ginny smiled at him and leaned against the doorframe with a steaming mug of tea cradled in her hands. Harry smiled back; she had taken to coming over unannounced, and it was always a pleasant surprise when she appeared, even though she did it every day. *“What’re you listening to?”* She was wearing the green turtleneck that he liked; it fit her too well and set off her hair, which was down on her shoulders, looking very pretty. It was almost enough to distract him from the circles under her eyes, and the fact that her freckles stood out in dark contrast to her white skin.

“Are you feeling all right?”

Ginny hesitated. *“Yes. Why?”*

“You look a bit worn out.”

She shrugged, and looked away. *“There’s another full moon coming, that’s all. I’m making Wolfsbane again this week.”*

Harry thought there might be more to it, but was distracted before he could answer.

“Gwendolyn Morgan, as everyone knows, fended off a famous proposal of marriage by her opposite number, Rudolf Brand. Asked you right on the pitch, didn’t he?”

“He did.”

“Clocked him round the head with your broom, didn’t you?”

“He hasn’t forgotten it.”

“Unless he’s forgotten everything. And you’ve been married how long now?”

“Is this Quidditch?” Ginny frowned at the wireless. *“Do you really want to listen to this?”*

Harry shrugged, and winced. All the bones in his back seemed to be crammed up between his

shoulder blades. "Yeah. It's still Quidditch."

"Who's playing?" Ginny sipped her tea.

"Bats against the Cannons."

She frowned more deeply, but didn't say anything, and Harry was glad. He knew it was stupid to listen to the game, when he wanted to be there so much. But he'd never had a chance to listen to a full season of Quidditch while at school, and he didn't want to pass up the opportunity now.

"They'll be flattened," she muttered into her mug, coming to the sofa. "I don't care who the captain is."

"You didn't see Oliver drilling everyone."

"The Bats have been first or second in the league for ten years," Ginny returned. "Yes, that's right, I know what goes on—don't give me that look like you're so shocked I keep up. Lift your head." She put her tea on their makeshift table and sat on the end cushion, and when Harry lay his head back down, he had her lap for a pillow. It had become so comfortable with her in such a short time, he marveled, letting his head loll against her stomach. She was always so warm, and she always seemed to *fit*, somehow—even the way her thigh curved under his neck was just right; and Harry's pulse quickened when she put her fingers in his hair. "What a mess," she said softly, brushing it away from his face.

"Cut it if you like, but it just grows back."

Ginny laughed. "I wouldn't cut it. It suits you."

"And on my right is Catriona McCormack, who played for Scotland no less than thirty-six times—your daughter is playing Keeper again this year for Portree, is that right?"

"Meaghan's still Keeper, that's right."

"And speaking of Keepers, we've got one hell of a man out there today for the Chudley Cannons—Oliver Wood, previously Puddlemere's top reserve player, actually left Puddlemere United at the end of last season and deliberately defected to the Chudley Cannons, famously the worst team in the League. Wood's old coaches are mystified, and he's kept his motivations completely under wraps."

"Ah, it's no mystery, lad. One too many Bludgers to the head, eh, Morgan?"

"I'd say so, McCormack."

"Yes, perhaps brain damage is partly responsible. But according to a statement he made this morning, Wood seems very confident—he's even changed the team motto back to 'We Shall Conquer'. What d'you think of that, ladies?"

"Balls."

"Horse shite."

"No, don't hold back—tell us how you really feel."

Ginny laughed. "He sounds like Lee."

Harry's mouth fell open; he sat up halfway and strained to hear. "I knew he sounded familiar!" he exclaimed.

"Really?"

"Shh—wait—"

"Well, we'll find out today just whether or not the Chudley Cannons are back in shape after a one hundred and six year absence from the running. They've got their work cut out for them against the Ballycastle Bats—"

"If they can stay alive for five minutes, I'll eat my cleats."

"That's Gwendolyn Morgan, ladies and gentlemen, and you'll all enjoy hearing her eat her cleats, I'm sure."

There was a profound snort. "Bit biased toward the Cannons, are we?"

"Let's just say I've got faith in Oliver Wood."

"It's him!" Ginny shrieked. "That's so cool!"

"Yeah, it is," Harry agreed, and tried to lie down again. But there was a sudden *crack!* that had nothing to do with magic, and he sat up again immediately, the ache in his back having just increased tenfold. "Ow," he muttered, reaching around himself to try and rub the painful area.

"Was that *you?*" Ginny asked in alarm, scooting up behind him and putting her fingers on the exact spot that Harry was trying to reach. "Ugh, your muscles are horribly tense."

"You can tell that?" he asked in surprise, dropping his hand and letting her feel her way around his spine.

"Just lean forward a minute and rest your elbows on your knees." She knelt up behind him on the cushion, but otherwise he couldn't see what she was doing. "Now relax as much as you can. No, *relax*, Harry. Take a deep breath.... yes. There. And actually, if you could drop your head, too,

and just let it hang- good."

Harry slumped forward and waited for his next instructions.

"And here come the Ballycastle Bats. Captain Michelle Ravel leads her team onto the pitch-and they do look strong-there's that incredible Seeker of theirs, Hull Huntington-in the six years he's played for Ballycastle, he has caught the Snitch all but four times."

"Can't imagine he'll miss today."

"Though I have to say I wouldn't mind seeing it go to the Cannons' Seeker."

"And here she comes-Maureen Knight, formerly the Bats' reserve, facing her old teammates at her first game. Knows just what she's up against. She played for Huntington once, when his wife was in labor-"

"And she missed the Snitch."

"Plowed herself good, though."

"Yes, a fascinating player, and another defector. She left the Bats at the same time Oliver Wood left Puddlemere, and joined the Cannons for her own untold reasons."

"Lad, it's like this-she wanted a bit of time in the spotlight, and there was no one rivaling her for it in Chudley."

"Not exactly true. She had first rate competition."

Harry tensed, waiting for it. Ginny touched his arm.

"Wood first offered that Seeker position to Harry Potter, who declined, as I understand it." Lee let out a sort of growl. "And let me tell you, if I get my hands on him, I'll wring his bloody neck."

Laughter followed that remark. *"Close mates with Harry Potter, are you?"*

"Something like that. But back to Maureen Knight-watch her warm up, there-she's got very interesting form, and I reckon she spent quite some time studying Fitz Colbert's methods..."

"I wish they'd stop talking and play." Ginny's hand traveled up his arm and stopped on his shoulder. *"Are you hurt right here?"* She dropped her fingertips lightly on the place where his right shoulder met his neck. *"I get a feeling that..."* She pressed down. *"This isn't from the dragons."*

Harry looked around at her, surprised. *"It's been sore on and off since I fell off my broom third year,"* he admitted. *"How can you tell that?"*

Ginny smiled slightly. *"It's just something I'm learning in class. Do you mind if I practice?"*

"No, go on."

"Okay." But rather than continuing, she rubbed her forehead with her free hand and shut her eyes.

"Ginny?" Harry turned around more fully and studied her face. Ever since his first day on dragon back-since she'd rolled away in pain-she had seemed under the weather. She certainly hadn't touched him like that since the first time, and he wondered if she was still feeling ill. They had kissed a little, and they held each other often, but she always seemed to be... protecting herself. He could hardly blame her, he supposed, the way he'd jumped on her. *"Are you-"*

"I'm okay," she answered, before he could ask the question. She opened her eyes and took her hand down. *"I stayed up too late, I had to make up an Astronomy lesson. Anyway, turn around, I want to try something."*

He looked doubtfully at her, but she ignored him and reached for his shoulders; as soon as she touched him, he gave in and slumped forward again.

"And the Quaffle is up! The season has officially begun! There's Chaser Firoza Newland showing great skill-"

"Never seen her before."

"Third reserve for the Wanderers, last year, and they were second to last."

"Whatever she was before, Oliver Wood certainly seems to have put her through her paces-look at her fly! And she passes to Cole Kerry, who seems to have it well in hand-but not for long! Ravel's not captain of the league's best team for nothing, that looked like taking candy from a baby-and she's halfway down the pitch-where are the Beaters at a time like this, damn it? She's headed straight for the goal hoops! Block her, Oliver! Give her hell! YES! He's blocked it!"

"Well!" There were chuckles. *"There's objectivity for you."*

"Would you take this off?" Ginny asked suddenly, tugging at the back of Harry's thick jumper. *"I can't... Well, I can't get a proper grip."*

Harry didn't think twice. He quickly pulled the jumper-which Mrs. Weasley had made for him-over his head, and then tugged his T-shirt back down. When Ginny's fingers alighted again on his spine, he shivered involuntarily. Her touch was now much closer to his skin. *"Is that better?"* he asked, his voice breaking slightly.

"Yes that's-better." He wondered if she was blushing. It sounded like she might be. It was a long moment before he heard her breathe deeply and settle into the cushion. Her hands spread out across his shoulder blades and moved slowly down his back, until her fingers rested in the center of his lower spine.

"That's horrible right there," she muttered. "And it's deep. Can you feel it?"

Harry concentrated, but felt nothing. "No."

Ginny pressed down slightly. "Then this might really hurt," she said. "I'm sorry, Harry. Grit your teeth."

Harry felt a thrill of apprehension, and wondered what she was about to do. He didn't have long to wonder.

Gripping the sides of his lower back with her fingers, Ginny began to dig her thumbs into the muscles on either side of his vertebrae, in the center of his lower back, where previously, he had felt nothing.

"What the—" Harry gasped, convulsing.

"Shh. Relax."

He tried, but it was near impossible. Whatever she was doing was the most pleasurable thing that had ever been done to him. Which was insane, when he took into account how much pain it was causing. It was like something being woken that didn't want to wake. He was feeling muscles he didn't know he had, and they had obviously been lying dormant, numb with terrible tension. Every dig that Ginny made with her thumbs seemed to unearth more of it and instead of becoming shallower it became more intense. He hung his head further, and bent lower with every push, until he lay almost completely forward on his legs.

"See," she said, her voice coming in little digs, with the movements of her hands. She sounded out of breath. "Sometimes when-the pain is-really bad-it tends to-hide." She switched from her thumbs and began to rub the heels of her hands into his back, hard.

"How do you know?" he mumbled hoarsely, from his knees.

"It's just-the way it is. Crookshanks had a-thorn buried-way up in his paw and he-didn't even-know it." She switched suddenly, and began to roll her knuckles deeply into his tissue.

Harry gasped again. It felt unbelievable. "Where did you learn how to *do* this?" he asked, hoping that if he just kept talking, then he wouldn't give into it completely. He didn't know what would happen if he did. The Quidditch game was still going-someone had just scored on Oliver-but he couldn't remember why it mattered. Her fingers kneaded all the muscles on either side of his vertebrae, working from the very bottom, and climbing one by one to the top, massaging in small circles that made Harry groan.

"Shh-just try to-breathe."

Harry tried to hold onto some shred of his sanity, but something that had been frozen inside him was thawing and flooding his senses. He shut his eyes and felt the unbearable rhythm of her hands. She took him by the shoulders and pressed the muscles there; he noticed how tender she was with the right side, where she had discovered his old Quidditch injury. For no reason he could name, Harry felt a sob fighting to get out of him.

"You're killing me," he rasped, and turned his head to kiss her fingers. He felt entirely unhinged-lightheaded-instinct drove him to reach a hand over his shoulder and search her out; he slipped his palm behind her neck and pulled her closer. Ginny leaned forward in instant reply and slid her cheek against his, her breathing audible and uneven. She made a soft, almost frightened noise, and pressed her body against his back.

"The Snitch is out! It's still early in the game, but the Seekers are racing for it-FOUL! A Bludger right into the crowd-looks like the Bats are getting nervous, if they're bumping in game one! And the Snitch is gone again--"

Harry couldn't have cared less. He turned to Ginny, seeking her mouth, pulling her into his arms. He wanted her so badly that it was painful, and she seemed to feel it too-she whispered his name in a way that sent shockwaves through him, and allowed him to gather her up without resistance. Harry's whole body burned-it had been weeks since she had yielded to him like this-forgetting what had happened the last time, he opened her lips with a deep kiss.

Dimly, he noticed that something was different. She made no noise. Instead of arching toward him, her body seemed to slump against his shoulder. And though she kissed him back at first, her mouth went suddenly passive beneath his. Her head fell back. Her jaw slackened.

Harry pulled away and stared at her in horror. She had passed out. He tried to prop her up, but her body fell to the side.

"Ginny?" he pled. She didn't answer. The circles beneath her eyes looked twice as deep as he

had previously noticed, and her pallor wasn't only pale; it was slightly blue. Something ice-cold gripped Harry's heart.

"Ginny," he said anxiously, laying her on the sofa and pulling his wand. "Ginny, come on, wake up. *Ennervate!*"

She did not respond.

"Wake up," he fretted, feeling for her breath. It was there, but it was very shallow and hardly comforting. "Come on, open your eyes." He felt for her pulse, and found that it was slow. He had a sudden, horrible memory of finding her tiny figure cold and half-dead on the floor of the Chamber of Secrets. "Wake up," he begged, "please wake up—what's the matter with you?" he yelled stupidly, as if she was going to answer. He pointed his wand at her again. "*Ennervate!*"

Nothing had ever frightened Harry so much as her total stillness. He knew it was pointless to reach out and shake her, but he did it anyway. He tried again and again to wake her with magic, but it didn't help. She continued to breathe, but just barely, and after five minutes that felt like an hour Harry fully panicked. He ran across the room to the fireplace, feeling a surge of terrible guilt for leaving Ginny's side, even to get help. In seconds, he had produced a fire and thrown powder into it.

"LUPIN LODGE," he roared at the flames, as if they were responsible for Ginny's condition. He stuck his head in. "REMUS!" he hollered, as soon as he saw the familiar front room before him. "REMUS, HURRY!"

Remus appeared in seconds, his wand out, his posture alert. He wasted no time. "You need me there?" he demanded.

"YES!" Harry shouted.

Two seconds later, Remus stood beside him at the Notch and, as if he had known in advance what he would find, he hurried directly to Ginny's side. "Go to my house," he instructed Harry in a quick, grim voice. "Get Ginny's satchel, I need something from it."

Harry had never done anything so quickly. He was back in his own house in seconds, holding Ginny's school bag and wondering how he'd managed not to splinch himself.

Remus dug through the bag and removed an enormous book. Harry barely read the embossed words on the cover—*Empathy in Sorcery*—before Remus had opened it from the back. He skimmed the index, turned to another page, and nodded curtly. "*Accio Eurycoma Longifolia!*" he said, and a phial sailed into the room.

Harry caught it, and recognized the curled, dried leaves as the same ones he'd used in school to make Reviving Draughts.

"Seed pod," Remus ordered, and when Harry had handed one to him, he crushed it in his fingers, pried Ginny's mouth open, and dropped it in. He pulled his wand and produced a cup of water. "Lift up her head."

Harry lifted Ginny's head with extreme care, and when the water had been administered, he propped her up a bit more, sitting behind her to cradle her head against his chest. He felt her breath rise and fall in shallow increments. "What's wrong with her?" he asked tensely. "Should we take her to St. Mungo's?"

"Only if she doesn't come around in a minute or so." Remus watched Ginny with narrowed eyes. "As for what's wrong with her—she's going to have to tell you that."

Harry was about to protest, when a spluttering noise and a sudden wetness on his hands made him forget his questions. Ginny was coughing violently, spattering all three of them with water and bits of crushed seed. Harry held onto her until she seemed capable of sitting up on her own—and even then, he didn't let go.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "What do you need?"

Ginny moaned and leaned forward, as if to get away from him. She had one hand on her stomach, and was trying to wipe her mouth with the other. "What's going on?" she asked weakly. "What just happened?"

"You passed out," Harry told her, and he realized his voice was shaking. "You just—fell back. You were hardly breathing."

Ginny's breath hitched as though she might be crying, but Harry couldn't see her face. "I'm so stupid," she mumbled, sniffing. "I'm so sorry."

Remus put a handkerchief into her hands. She slowly mopped up her face and her front with a shaking hand, and awkwardly swiped at Harry's sleeves.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I don't care."

"I'm sorry," she muttered again, sounding embarrassed this time.

"You should be," Remus said. He gazed levelly at her. "You knew exactly what the consequences

might be. This was very irresponsible of you, Ginny."

Harry was about to protest for her, but Ginny answered before he could.

"I know." It was a whisper. "Harry, you have to let go of me. It hurts. I'm sorry."

Harry retracted his arms and moved away from her, feeling as though he moved through fog. He didn't know what was going on, but it hardly mattered. He'd had a feeling, before, that he had been the cause of this illness, whatever it was. And if he was hurting her, then he had probably been right.

"Harry deserves a very thorough explanation," Remus said, still not taking his gaze from Ginny, who had fallen against the back of the sofa the second Harry had let her go. Her head hung forward on her chest. "But we need to get you home first. Can you stand?"

"No."

Remus stood up and levitated Ginny's body into midair before him. "Fortunately for us, this street is all wizards," he muttered, and guided her prone form towards the door.

Harry opened it, but his eyes stayed fixed on Ginny, who wasn't looking at him. "Can I come?" he asked, wondering if his presence would only continue to make her ill. The thought of not being allowed near her made his chest constrict.

"Give me a few minutes," Remus said. "I'll revive her further at home, and she'll be able to speak with you."

"All right."

Ginny's breath hitched again; her suspended body shook, and Harry could see that tears were making their way out of the corners of her eyes; she tried to wipe them away. "I hate this," she mumbled thickly to herself. "I don't want this. It's not fair."

Remus sighed and floated her body down the porch steps. Harry was left standing in his front room, confused and anxious.

"Fifty to thirty, Bats in the lead—but this is by far the best we've seen the Cannons play in decades! What they lack in years of team practice they're certainly making up for with enthusiasm—or perhaps it's fear. Wood's an awe-inspiring captain. Oh—right. Pausing here for a word from one of the game's first commercial sponsors and the Ballycastle Bats' team mascot, here's Barney the Bat with a song you all know—so sing along, especially you young kids out there, because they wrote this one with you in mind, I'm sure."

"I'm just batty about Butterbeer!"

"Aren't we all. Right then, where were we?"

Harry listened to the wireless without really hearing it. Something very definite was happening, and it had to do with him, and yet Ginny hadn't told him about it. She was sick. He'd made her sick. His eyes strayed to the enormous book that Remus has left on the table, and in his impatience to have an answer, he nearly lunged for it.

Empathy in Sorcery: A History and Guide

He had been too scared, earlier, to realize what the title meant; now he sat down and stared at it. Hermione had once given him and Ron a lecture on Empathy. In her quest to find a remedy for her parents, she had discovered that there had been wizards called Healers who used Empathic magic, but that none now existed. Harry couldn't remember anything else she had said, but it didn't matter—it was enough to know that there if there were no Healers, then there was no need for an Empathic textbook in Ginny's satchel. Unless.

He opened the book and began to scan its contents, flipping rapidly through pages, skipping chapters, and reading the parts that she had highlighted.

"The recommended first subject of study for any Healer in training is not a fellow human being—though this will be most Healers' natural inclination. The newfound ability to help others must be resisted until the Healer has truly mastered his or her gift."

"The ability to sense and soothe pain in others, though the ultimate gift of the Healer, is a dangerous gift with which to experiment. If a novice Healer has a personal relationship with the object of his or her Healing, this danger increases exponentially in relationship to the depth of said personal relationship. The wish to assist must be resisted by novices. Irresponsible use of this gift will cause mental and physical damage to the Healer."

"Step one: Place your hands on the skin or clothing of your subject, and slide your palms slowly across the afflicted area. (Eventually, all sensing will be done in your subject's aura; not on his or her skin. However, to build skill, touch is a necessary beginning.) Concentrate on those areas emanating unnatural heat or cold. Press lightly, trusting instinct to guide your hands. If you have prepared properly, your natural gifts will inform the method and depth of your touch."

Harry realized that he was gripping the sides of the textbook so hard that his hands hurt. He

didn't know if he had ever been this angry. She hadn't trusted him. She had scared the hell out of him. She had been... *experimenting* on him, with magic that she clearly could not control. No wonder the Dementors hadn't taken a worse toll on him. No wonder she had looked sicker every day, since he had started dragon riding—he couldn't believe it had taken him so long to realize that none of it was accidental. *Nothing* between them was accidental. Harry turned back to a page he had marked with his finger, and reread one sentence in particular until his brain throbbed.

"If no one present recognizes the phenomenon, the novice Healer will often spend his or her entire life devoted to a person whose pain is so intense that it requires constant attention, unaware that this devotion is a product of Empathic Magic."

Harry shut the book with a slam. He was nauseated. He couldn't help thinking that Ginny had been fairly well devoted to him ever since they'd met. And now this book was telling him that her attention had been dictated by magic... He couldn't process it.

It dawned clearly on Harry just how much it had meant to him to believe that Ginny loved him. Even when he hadn't wanted to admit it to himself, he had always known that she was there, and that she was his. She had always been his. And since the beginning of summer, he had slowly become *hers*. She knew him in ways that no one ever had; she made him feel safe with himself—and there was nothing magic about the way he felt for her. Harry knew the difference. It was how she smiled, tilting her head to the side in the way she had. It was how she laughed at the same things he found funny. It was how she looked quietly at him, and made him want to tell her everything. It was the way he *had* to watch her, the way she knew where to touch him, the way her mouth felt against his—the way she understood exactly who he was. Voldemort had nearly destroyed her. She knew loss and war. She loved Ron and Hermione. She had been there, when his life had begun on platform nine and three-quarters, and seven years later, without fear or hesitation, she had risked her life for his. He wasn't in love with her Empathy.

Harry put his head in his hands.

"And somebody's going to have to EAT HER CLEATS—that's right, ladies and gentlemen, this is Lee Jordan, announcing the first Chudley Cannons win against the Ballycastle Bats in over sixty years! The crowd's gone out of its mind—"

"Take a look at that red-haired bloke."

"Is he trying to climb the railing?"

"And why wouldn't he, when Maureen Knight has CAUGHT THE SNITCH—look at that woman fly! And she's not a bad looking woman, at that! I think I'll have to abuse my stadium privileges and meet that Seeker later on—but someone's beat me to it—would you look at Oliver Wood! Have you ever seen such a madman—throwing his arms around his Seeker in midair—whoa there, but she's not having any of it, is she? Pushed him halfway across the pitch! A lady after your own heart, Gwendolyn!"

Numbly, Harry flicked off the wireless and Disapparated to Lupin Lodge. He appeared in the corridor just outside of Ginny's room, still holding her book. He could hear her talking.

"Remus, you don't have to..."

"I think you proved today that I *do* have to." There was a creaking noise, like someone getting out of a chair.

"But it's Saturday," Ginny protested.

"And we decided to run our school as nearly to Hogwarts as possible. Detentions for misuse of magic are as applicable on Saturdays as they are on other days, unless my memory is mistaken. You have detention every day for a week." Remus paused. "I'm extremely disappointed. You assured me that you would not deliberately abuse your studies."

"You don't understand—it's not deliberate! I can't help it! Whenever he—"

"I'm *right* out here," Harry called, not bothering to keep the fierceness out of his voice. He rapped hard on the door. "Do I get an explanation now?"

There was a short silence, and then: "Come in," Remus said.

Harry threw the door open and held the book up, pinning Ginny with his eyes. She glanced up at him from her position against her pillows, and at the sight of the book she seemed to grow paler.

"Are you a Healer?" he demanded.

She jumped. "How much of that did you read?"

He ignored her question and advanced on her; Remus quickly excused himself and slipped out of the room, shutting the door behind him. "Have you been... *trying* stuff on me?" Harry demanded. "Without saying anything?"

"Don't yell at me," Ginny retorted, recoiling against the headboard. "You don't know what it's like."

"Try telling me," Harry shot back. "Try being honest."

"I never lied! I *said* it was for class."

"You said you felt *fine*."

"Oh, you're one to talk. I said I was fine, and I thought I was!" Ginny swiped at her eyes and pushed back her hair until it was a tangled mess on the pillow.

"Mental and physical damage, this book says. You passed out on me, and I had no idea what was going on—and I couldn't wake you up."

"I said I was sorry. I didn't know that would happen."

"You're not even supposed to try it on people. What did you think was going to happen?"

"Well how am I supposed to help it when you come home every day looking like death, and I can *feel* all of it?" she burst out in a passion, punching her bedcovers. "I don't know how to control it, Harry, I wasn't doing it on purpose, and I can't stand being near you and not being able to—"

"You were touching me just like the instructions said to do!" Harry shook the book. "How could that not be on purpose?" He flipped the book open to the page he hated most, and stalked to her bedside.

"Don't—" she warned, holding up a hand and wincing.

"Don't worry." Harry placed the book in her lap and pointed to the sentence that had been crushing his spirit ever since he'd read it. "I'm not staying." He went for the door.

"Harry, wait—please, please wait."

Harry stopped short and looked back at her. Her head was bent, reading, and her hair shone in the lamplight. Her finger slowly traced the lines he'd pointed out, and she shook her head. "Oh no," she breathed, looking up at him.

"No? Your—" Harry felt strangled. "Your feelings aren't because you're a Healer?"

"No—yes—I don't know exactly how..." Ginny gestured uselessly with her hands. "I'm not sure where my feelings stop and start. I haven't worked it all out. But Harry, you don't understand—"

"When you touched me earlier—you were practicing, right?" Harry managed, his hands in fists. "And that night I first came home from Azkaban—that kiss. That was Empathy."

Some of the color came back into Ginny's face. "Yes, but not—"

"Then I understand," Harry interrupted, sick at heart. He walked out without another word.

* * * * *

Sirius tried not to panic when he heard the announcer on the WWN say that it was nine o'clock. He'd been getting up at five almost every morning since summer, but today he'd had to wait until sunrise for Remus to transform. Despite the full moon, he'd slept amazingly well as Padfoot; Remus still hadn't consented to let him sleep in the shed, so he had kept watch outside the door.

Now Remus was upstairs having a bath and Sirius was making what was, for him, a late breakfast. He was starving, and, in addition to toast and tea and coffee, was also frying sausage and tomatoes, and simmering a pot of baked beans.

As breakfast cooked, Sirius mentally went through his list of tasks for the day. He planned to stop by his office at the Ministry and pick up some files before heading to Culparrat. The new prison had been divided into two sections—one for those who had been tried and found guilty, and one for those who were still awaiting trial. At the moment, all of the inhabitants were Stunned and being watched over by Aurors and other special guards assigned by the M.L.E.S. It was so quiet there. He wasn't sure which was more disturbing; the constant noise and babbling that had filled the air when Azkaban had been in operation, or the overwhelming silence that seemed to echo off the walls in Culparrat. They *had* to find a way of keeping the prisoners inside while awake—without using Dementors as guards. The sophisticated wards that currently surrounded the fortress were strong, but not new, and it was possible to break them from inside or out with only slight intelligence of the facility. He decided he'd better pester Arthur about finding more people to help Penelope with that Imprisonment Charm.

Crookshanks purred loudly and rubbed against Sirius's leg. "Sorry," he said, reaching down to stroke the cat's fluffy coat. "You're hungry, I suppose." With a sharp whine, Crookshanks followed Sirius to his food bowl.

"I'll do that." Ginny had just opened the back door. She was carrying the pile of blankets and pillows from the shed. She looked a bit tired—her eyes were puffy and her hair was pulled into a not-so-neat knot at the back of her head. "Did you sleep well?"

"Wonderfully," Sirius answered, stretching a little, and then reaching to the shelf for the cat food. "Not that it did me much good. What about you? You look like you didn't get much yourself. You weren't up worrying, I hope?"

"I'm okay," she answered, shaking her head when he held out a piece of toast to her. "I'm just

going to go and wash these—are you making breakfast?”

Sirius looked at her questioningly. The smell of sausage and the toast in his hand made it rather obvious that was what he was doing. Ginny sighed. “I was supposed to do that,” she mumbled, trying to get a better grip on all of the pillows and blankets in her arms.

“It’s all right, Ginny.” Remus entered the kitchen and sat down on a stool. His hair was still wet. “I’m sure whatever Sirius has fried up is edible.”

“Okay,” said Ginny. Sirius thought that she looked a bit red in the face as she walked past both of them, tripping a bit on one of the blankets that dragged along the floor. Remus gave her a reassuring smile and she looked relieved, but stopped in the doorway. “Sirius, do you need anything from the village? I’m going shopping for a few things in a bit.”

Sirius shook his head. “No thanks.” He watched as Ginny stumbled out of the room and up the stairs.

“What’s going on?” asked Sirius, motioning towards Ginny with a spatula.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, why are you letting her run around doing all this housework when she looks so tired? Her mother will kill us if we don’t take care of her properly. She’s not our house-elf. She looks terrible.”

“You can talk.”

Sirius grinned. “So can you. You sprouted a few more grey hairs last night, Moony.”

Remus sighed. “It’s part of her detention. And it’s lucky for her that I didn’t send an owl home. I will next time.”

“Her what?” Sirius was surprised. Ever since Ginny had made that first batch of Wolfsbane Potion, he’d found it difficult to find fault with anything that she did. “What has she done that warrants a detention?”

“She got a bit too involved in her homework.”

“And you’re punishing her?” Sirius chortled. “If you’d been my professor, I never would have had detention.”

“This is different.”

Sirius handed a cup of tea to Remus, who took a sip, grimaced, and reached for the sugar bowl. “You aren’t going to give me more of an explanation?”

“It’s simple,” said Remus, reaching up to yank a hair out of his head, and then scrutinizing it. “This one’s still brown. Anyway—” Remus tossed the hair aside “—I told her at the beginning of September that she shouldn’t rush her training as a Healer. I told her that she shouldn’t—*couldn’t*—work with people yet, and that it would make her sick if she tried.”

“So, she tried? On who?”

“Who do you think?”

Sirius dropped the frying pan onto the top of the cooker with a thump. Remus winced and pinched the bridge of his nose, as if to ward off a headache.

“Sorry,” Sirius mumbled. “She tried to heal *Harry*? Is he ill? What’s wrong with him?” Realizing that he was whispering for no good reason, he cleared his throat and, trying to sound nonchalant, asked, “Did it work?”

Remus was now staring at him as if he were the biggest idiot on the planet. He spoke very deliberately. “*Harry* has been spending his time flying around Azkaban on a dragon. He spends ten hours a day within fifty feet of the Dementors. No, he’s not exactly in the best of health, at least not mentally. Haven’t you noticed how amazingly cheerful he’s seemed since starting that job? Didn’t it seem strange to you?”

Closing his eyes, Sirius said, “I thought he was just *happy*. I thought that he and Ginny were, well, *good* and he’s been acting just like James did—”

And that was the truth. He hadn’t given it much thought. He’d been relieved the past few weeks that Harry had seemed so relaxed and easy-going. In a way, it had been as if Prongs had rejoined them. Sirius knew that Harry was his own person—that there were very great differences between father and son—but it had been so comforting to come home in the evenings, see Harry sitting in the study with Ginny. It made Sirius feel as if everything was returning to the normalcy that he had known when Prongs was alive.

“Ginny,” Remus continued, “has been deliberately absorbing all of Harry’s negative energies. It’s not healthy for either of them. Controlling these sorts of powers can take years to refine.”

“Does Harry know that’s what’s been going on?”

“He knows now. Haven’t you noticed that he hasn’t been here since Saturday? Although—” Remus stopped, and seemed to be choosing his words very carefully. Sirius knew what was coming,

no matter how Remus might try to word it “–it’s not like you’ve been around here much yourself lately.”

Sirius deliberately plunked two pieces of toast onto a plate, and then dumped some beans on top. Remus hated it when his food touched. “Moony–I thought we’d agreed not to get into that.”

“Right,” said Remus briskly. “So, what are you going to do today then?”

“Well...” Sirius tried to remember what he’d been planning earlier, and found that he’d drawn a blank. He was worried about Harry. He thought about going to Azkaban–he hadn’t been out there since before they’d started riding the dragons–he hadn’t had time, and the Dementors had more of an effect on him than he cared to admit. Besides, he’d promised Remus that he would stay away.

“I’ll be spending most of the day at Culparrat,” he said, with false brightness. “Ron marked up a bunch of files yesterday afternoon and I’ve got to sort through them today. There’s a trial tomorrow.”

“Ron’s been keeping busy, helping you with all of this research.”

“He has,” said Sirius, toasting two more pieces of bread with a violent shake of his wand that singed the edges of the toast. Remus probably hadn’t meant to start a fight–after all, he’d just transformed a few hours earlier.

“When are you going to start paying him?”

“Dunno,” answered Sirius. There had been many nights in the past few weeks when Sirius had been disappointed to see Ron go off to the pub, especially when they had been close to finding new information on a case. But he didn’t know if he was allowed to hire help. “I suppose I’ll stop by and see Arthur this morning then–find out what the Ministry can afford. Do you really think Ron will want to quit the pub?”

Remus laughed. “You won’t know unless you ask, will you?”

* * * * *

By the time Sirius arrived at Azkaban, it was three o’clock and already starting to get dark. It was also raining, very hard, and he couldn’t see anything out the window of the PAP headquarters.

“Sirius!” Charlie Weasley entered from the back, holding a model of a Welsh Green in one hand. “I thought I heard someone up here.”

“What are you doing?” Sirius asked, thinking that Charlie was a bit too old to be playing with dolls.

“Come on back and have a look–Cho and I were just testing out some new flight patterns.” He led Sirius to the back room, where a pretty girl was watching two miniature dragons fly around a three-dimensional model of Azkaban.

“Sirius,” said Charlie, clearing his throat. “This is my assistant and fellow dragon-rider, Cho Chang. Cho, this is Sirius Black.”

Cho held out her hand and gave Sirius a sweet smile. She didn’t look as spooked as some people still did at the mention of his name. Then again, Sirius thought, he probably wasn’t as intimidating as a full-grown dragon.

“We were trying to see how difficult it would be for two riders to cover the area, and we’re testing a few new dives. Sometimes those Dementors try to trick us. It’s too bad that a good dose of fire isn’t enough to do them in.” Charlie jumped back just as one of the model dragons emitted a small jet of flame.

“Have you tried?” asked Sirius, trying not to sound too hopeful.

“Course we’ve tried,” said Charlie. “The Dementors just glide through it. I think they *like* fire.” He rubbed at the spot on his elbow where the miniature dragon had attacked.

“Can we go outside and have a look at the real dragons?” Sirius checked his watch. He was eager to try to talk to Harry, although he wasn’t quite sure what he would say. ‘Sorry your girlfriend was using you as a lab rat,’ didn’t seem appropriate. James would have said something more diplomatic and understanding than that, although no amount of imagining could help Sirius figure out what that might be.

“If you want to go out in *that*,” said Charlie, gesturing with his thumb to the wind and rain outside. “But I’d rather wait until my shift starts. You can watch almost as well from in here.”

Sirius looked dubiously at the darkness outside the window.

Cho waved her wand, and the two dragons that had been flying around the Azkaban model froze and flew to her hand. With another flick, something shimmered over the model, and soon three miniature dragons were flying around the prison, a tiny rider on top of each of them.

“Not bad, eh?” asked Cho. “There’s Harry.” She pointed with her wand to a dragon that was flying low to the water. Sirius’s heart froze when he saw that it was pushing a Dementor back to the shore. He reminded himself that it wasn’t real–that it was just an image, but then again, it *was*

real to Harry, who was flying around outside.

"Is that Malfoy?" Sirius asked, pointing to a resplendent scarlet dragon on the opposite side of the island. It seemed wrong to see a Malfoy flying on something that had the natural coloring of a Gryffindor. Charlie nodded. "It's the strangest thing we've ever seen. I'd never, *ever* seen a tame Chinese Fireball before he showed up, and I wasn't sure how the other dragons were going to take to it, especially Norbert. But Malfoy's dragon is surprisingly docile, and all the other dragons seem to ignore him. We keep a close eye on him, but there haven't been any problems—for all his faults, Malfoy's a good rider." Charlie said the last few words manfully, though he looked like he'd just tasted something foul.

"Do you think the Death Eaters used that dragon in the war?" asked Sirius.

Charlie shrugged. "Probably, but there's no proof, and that dragon's been a pet in Malfoy's family for two generations. It's got papers."

"Are the Dementors supposed to get that close?" Sirius asked, watching as Mick took a dive and directed one gracefully back into the rocks.

"It just looks close," reassured Cho. "It's been consistently about fifty feet, so that's about right on the model—" Cho furrowed her brow in confusion. "But that Dementor *does* look like it's getting fairly close to Norbert, doesn't it? Charlie, look at this."

All eyes turned to scrutinize the miniature replica of Azkaban. Harry was flying Norbert very close to the water. The wind and rain swirling around the fortress made it difficult to see clearly, magnified by the fact that as soon as they looked, Norbert emitted a huge plume of flame. The resulting smoke rose up over the water, mixing with the clouds and disintegrating into the dusk. Everything looked grey.

Except...

"What's that?" asked Sirius, pointing to a small cloud of white that was hovering thinly in front of Harry.

"Looks like a Patronus," said Charlie, already pulling on his jacket. "But why?"

He didn't need to wait long to find out. Harry was about a half mile from Azkaban. A Dementor was directly in front of him. Norbert seemed to be struggling, and Harry seemed unwilling to fly higher until the Dementor turned back. But there was something else in the water. At first, Sirius had thought that it was just a pile of rocks, jutting out to sea. He knew from his own experience that the waters surrounding Azkaban contained several of these rock formations—they had been perfect places for Padfoot to stop and rest. But, as he peered closer, he realized with a dropping feeling in his stomach, that it was actually a group of Dementors—about a dozen in all—and they were gliding with alarming speed directly towards Harry and Norbert.

Charlie and Cho were already out the door, and Sirius rushed after them, his wand ready. The wind and rain rushed at his face, and he could barely see two feet in front of him. Cho and Charlie both had broomsticks in their hands, and they took off into the air immediately.

Hoping that there were some spares in the headquarters, Sirius concentrated as hard as he could. "*Accio broomstick!*" A Nimbus Seventy-Seven flew into his hands, and he leapt onto it. As the broomstick shivered and shook in the air, Sirius wished more than ever that he could locate his old motorbike. At least then he would have had some strong headlights.

Sirius flew blindly, unable to see either Harry or Norbert; the light at the end of his wand couldn't cut through the overwhelming gray that densely surrounded him.

Then, from above, came a blinding jet of fire. Sirius swerved to avoid being burnt, and just in time to miss being hit by a large, scarlet tail. Assuming that Malfoy was headed in Harry's direction, Sirius followed the dragon, making sure to stay well behind it, thankful for its bright colors. As they neared Azkaban, Sirius could make out several others on broomsticks, hovering in a semi-circle. In front of them was an opaque white light—the glow, he realized, of numerous Patronus charms being cast at one time.

Despite the distance between himself and the Dementors, Sirius could feel a sudden depression falling over him. Before he could stop it, a vision of an emerald green Dark Mark in the sky, of the smoking remains of a house, of James and Lily on the ground... came flooding into his mind. All that he could hear was the high-pitched sound of a baby crying—Harry.

"Give him to me, Hagrid, I'm his godfather, I'll look after him."

"Sorry, Sirius, I'm under strict orders from Dumbledore. Harry's ter go ter his aunt an' uncle's—Lily's family."

The Chinese Fireball sped far ahead of Sirius, and took a dive. Sirius's head cleared instantly, and he could finally see Norbert, noticing thankfully that Harry was still in control of the dragon, and was still trying to push Dementors back towards Azkaban's shore. With the help of the Aurors,

there was now considerable space between Harry and the Dementors, although they were still not retreating as fast as they should.

At first, Sirius thought that what he saw next was a trick of light. Malfoy's scarlet dragon swooped down in between Norbert and the line of Dementors. Miraculously, neither Norbert nor the Fireball seemed to mind being that close to one another. Then, as calmly as if they were herding sheep into a pasture, Malfoy floated towards the Dementors, who suddenly started moving very quickly, and, in a matter of seconds, had all retreated into the cracks and crevices of the Azkaban fortress.

All that Sirius could do was sit back on the broomstick and float. He was wet to the bone, shivering from the cold, and completely exhausted. It was all too unpleasantly familiar: the jagged rocks, the stormy water, and the fortress looming in the distance. He was lucky, he realized, that he'd broken free from Azkaban in the summer.

He saw the Aurors retreating, and Charlie Weasley bobbing up and down in the air next to Norbert. Charlie and Harry seemed to be having an intense discussion, and after a moment, Charlie flew off, and Harry turned and directed Norbert back to shore. A burly reserve rider on a large Welsh Green took off in the distance as Harry brought Norbert down to land. Malfoy was still circling Azkaban lazily, though Sirius barely noticed him. It had been a long time since he had remembered Godric's Hollow so clearly. Holding back something that felt like a sob, Sirius flew back to the headquarters, more certain than ever that the only way to stop the Dementors was to slaughter them.

The headquarters were deserted, with the exception of Alastor Moody, who was pacing back and forth in the front room, his wooden leg thumping in no particular rhythm on the floor. Sirius threw the broomstick into a corner and shook out his hair. When that did nothing but send water flying onto his shoulders, he let out a grunt of frustration and transformed into Padfoot. He ran around the room several times, skidding to a halt in front of the fire and shaking his fur vigorously. Moody pulled his wand and pointed it at Sirius. "I thought I was one for theatrics," he said, raising the eyebrow above his good eye. "You're making the room smell like wet dog, Black." He uttered a drying spell.

Sirius transformed. It had been unnecessary, but he had needed some way to let out his anger, and Padfoot had always been able to put distance between him and his old memories. "What the *hell* happened out there?" he spat at Moody, pointing at the door. "What *was* that?" When Charlie walked in a moment later, looking worried, Sirius repeated his question. "What was that?" He tried to keep his voice under control.

"I don't know," said Charlie, quietly. He looked quite shaken up. "It doesn't make sense. We're having Norbert checked out right now. Draco and Mick's dragons didn't seem to have any problems."

"It figures," muttered Sirius. "Where's Harry? What did he say? Has he noticed anything unusual about Norbert lately? How is he?"

"I'm *fine*," Harry stood in the doorway. He was dry—and the Firebolt that Sirius had given to him when he was thirteen was clutched in his hand.

Sirius rushed over to him. "Harry, what happ—" But Harry cut him off. "Norbert probably just has a cold." He turned to face Charlie. "The keepers are going to give him something in his food tonight. Do you think he'll be okay to ride in the morning?"

"In the morning?" repeated Sirius. "In the morning? Harry, you're *not* getting on top of that dragon again."

Harry didn't seem to hear him. As a matter of fact, he seemed to be pointedly *ignoring* Sirius.

"Weasley," said Moody, clearing his throat, "I'd say it's possible that the Ridgeback is less effective against Dementors than the Greens."

"It's possible," came an answer from the doorway, but it wasn't from Charlie. Mick O'Malley stood in the door, along with Draco Malfoy. Mick entered the room and clapped Harry on the back. "Sorry I missed the excitement, Harry. With the wind and the rain, I really couldn't see what was going on over on your side. I should have suspected something—I didn't see any Dementors for close to two hours." He turned to Charlie, "We need to get that communication spell set up."

Sirius took a step forward. "So you didn't feel anything different about your dragon?" he asked Mick. Then he turned to Malfoy, who appeared to be somewhat amused by the whole situation. "What about you?" Sirius barked at him. "You certainly managed to ride in and save the day—there must have been a dozen Dementors out there."

"There were thirteen," said Moody gruffly. "And they were strong—I know that the Aurors have been out of practice since the dragons arrived on the scene, but it took quite a few Patronus charms to set them back. It was almost as if they'd banded together."

Eyeing Malfoy suspiciously, Sirius opened his mouth to speak, but Malfoy held up a finger. "I'd

be careful if I were you, Black. You wouldn't want to *defame* my *character*. I didn't do anything except possibly save Potter's life."

An angry sound escaped Harry's throat, and Sirius noticed that he was gripping his broomstick so tightly that his knuckles were white.

"Potter," began Moody, artfully stepping forward between Malfoy and Sirius, "have the Dementors been affecting you at all? I've noticed you setting off quite a few Patronus charms while you're flying around up there."

"No," said Harry with force, and Sirius was certain that he was lying. He looked ill. His eyes were dull, and his skin pale and almost green in tint.

"May I be excused?" asked Malfoy, who, in contrast, appeared to be the picture of health. His hair looked like he'd just had it done, and his eyes were bright. "I have plans this evening."

Sirius was about to object, but Moody nodded and Charlie said, "Sure, go ahead," and then, with obvious force, added, "Thanks for all your *help*."

"Right," said Sirius, taking a step closer to Harry as Malfoy disappeared into thin air. "You're coming home now."

"I don't live at Lupin Lodge anymore," Harry said, not looking at Sirius. "I'm going to stay and see what's wrong with Norbert."

Sirius flinched at his tone, and narrowed his eyes at Charlie. "I think it's clear there's something wrong with the Ridgeback—there must be another dragon?"

"Sure," said Charlie. We have a reserve because Malfoy brought his own. We don't like to use him though— he's named Flatulo for a reason."

Moody snorted.

"I'm riding Norbert," said Harry determinedly, turning his back and heading out the door. "Let's go, Mick."

Sirius knew by the very James-like set of his shoulders that it was useless to try and stop him. He watched him go—watched as the dragon riders and Moody followed Harry and made their ways out into the rain once more. Sirius remained alone in the headquarters, so frustrated that he could not resist the urge to kick something—his foot connected with solid wood and a chair splintered against the wall, but it gave him no relief. He was a failure as a godfather. *They should have left Harry to Remus*, he thought bitterly. He inwardly cursed James and Lily for trusting him, and resisted an urge to fly to their graves and jump up and down repeatedly. They should have known better. They had trusted him with important decisions before, and it had brought misery to everyone. Sirius had a feeling that, if they could have done it from beyond the grave, they would have revoked his guardianship and given Harry to someone else.

Sirius had a sudden memory of Lily, sitting quietly in her bedroom rocking chair, a white cloth draped over her breast and Harry's face as she fed him.

"*That's freakish*," Sirius had told her from the hallway, pointing at the feeding process. "*You're scarring my godson for life*."

"*Hey, get out of here*—" James had tried to push Sirius out of viewing distance, but Sirius had pushed back and Lily had only laughed at them as they'd got into a wrestling match, right there in the doorway.

"*I'm covered up, James, for pity's sake!*"

"*He's been trying to get a peek at you since first year*," James had retorted, trying to pin Sirius and failing.

"*Oh really?*" Lily had asked lightly, shooting Sirius a knowing grin. "*Well, he's entitled to a good look at this if he wants it, because if he has to take Harry then he'll have to take over these feedings, won't he? There are certain charms that men can use for this sort of thing—I'll make sure to write them down for you, Sirius. Won't you look lovely with a pair of—*"

James had fallen apart laughing, and Sirius had looked up, appalled. "*You're a sick woman*."

"*You'd do it, though*," she'd returned, still grinning. "*I know you. Shut your eyes*."

Sirius had done so, and when he'd opened them again, Lily had shut her robes and was holding Harry out to him.

Harry had been so tiny and pale and dark-headed. Big green eyes had blinked up at Sirius when he'd approached to pick up his godson's little form and cradle him in one arm. "*Who's this big man?*" Sirius had said in a stupid voice, tickling the baby's round stomach with one finger. "*Who's this big scary man?*" He had lifted Harry's little shirt and given him a raspberry on his belly, making him giggle and reach up with chubby hands,

to pat Sirius's face. "*Oh, he's got me!*" Sirius had shouted, pretending to stagger. "*He's going to knock me flat!*" He'd kissed Harry on the nose. "*You'll break hearts, you know that? Remind me a bit of myself, actually—strong, rakishly handsome—Prongs, are you sure he's yours?*"

James had punched him from behind.

"*Hey, don't make me drop him!*" Sirius had shouted, clinging to Harry.

Lily had looked on as they had continued playing, her gaze strangely distant and satisfied. "*You'll take care of him,*" she had said suddenly. "*You'll love him for us.*"

At her words, both Sirius and James had stopped pretending to fight, and the room had gone suddenly, horribly still.

"*Don't say it like that,*" James had said quickly, coming around Sirius. "*We're not going anywhere.*"

Lily had given her head a quick shake and the light had come back into her eyes. "*I know.*"

But they had been wrong.

Sirius drew his wand and pointed it at the shattered chair. "*Reparo,*" he muttered. They had trusted him to love their son in their stead, and now he had spent the last four months obsessed with justice, ignoring his duty to James and Lily almost entirely. He rubbed his head. He needed time—time to set aside just for Harry, if Harry would accept it. Ron's assistance really *had* relieved the pressure of his trial preparations—perhaps if he could have Ron full time... Well, Arthur would simply have to agree. And hopefully Ron would agree. And regardless of all of it, there had to be a way to annihilate the Dementors and spare Harry the torture of this idiot job he'd taken.

There was a lot to work out. Newly determined, his mind buzzing with ideas and resolutions, Sirius focused on the Ministry, twisted his wand, and Disapparated.

A/N: Thanks to the wonderful beta readers (now including Caroline): it is a humbling experience to have so many editors find so many different errors, but it is also an educational one.

Thanks also to the attendees of SQOMP. It was a damn good time.

— CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR —

Halloween

The light from several hundred pumpkins filled the Great Hall with a warm orange glow and to Ron, it seemed almost like Hogwarts was back in session. Though there were no students in work robes, the House banners hung proudly on the walls, the stones were polished, and the etched window glass had been replaced. Professors ate and talked at the head table while discussing the difficulty of integrating first and second year classes when Hogwarts reopened. The ghosts mingled with old friends, looking unusually cheerful; Nearly Headless Nick was tipping a festive-looking hat to the Grey Lady, and even the Bloody Baron seemed less gruesome. Professor McGonagall's decision to host a Halloween Feast had been inspired; everyone had been happily surprised, and thousands of Hogwarts alumni and prospective parents had arrived on the grounds to see for themselves the state of the school.

"Happy, Happy Halloweenie—Watch your head 'cos I'm a meanie!"

Ron ducked out of the way just in time to avoid the full impact of one of Peeves's water balloons. At least some things never changed. He straightened and brushed some drops from the sleeves of his dress robes, and nearly tripped over Colin Creevey, who was kneeling in a very awkward position on the floor.

"Hey, Colin," Ron said. Colin had leaned far back; he was trying to get a shot of the newly restored ceiling of the Great Hall while, at the front of the Hall, Professor McGonagall was giving a "short" speech to a group of attentive parents. She went on and on, detailing the significance of the ceiling in Hogwarts' history, addressing the cultural impact of having shut Hogwarts for a year, and assuring the parents that the school was well on its way to reopening by the following September. Against his will, Ron found himself straining to hear her over the music that was playing. Most of her speech sounded like something straight out of Hermione's mouth.

"Just a sec!" Colin grunted, snapping a photograph and then pushing himself upright. "Hey, Ron." He dusted off a hand on his robes, then offered it to Ron. "Dean did a great job up there, don't you think?" he said, squinting upwards again.

"Yes, he did—look, do you think that I could get some copies of the photographs from tonight? I can pay you for them." It felt so good to be able to say that. He wasn't making much more as Sirius's assistant than he had been at the pub, but he no longer had to depend on tips, or lack thereof. He was feeling a bit extravagant.

Colin shrugged. "Sure, no problem. Don't worry about paying, though. I always make extra copies anyway—I'll send you some when they're developed. Say, have you seen Eloise?"

Ron pointed to where Eloise Midgen was taking careful notes of all that Professor McGonagall said, her curls bobbing with every studious nod of her head. Colin thanked him and strode towards her, and Ron wandered off with his hands in his pockets, cheerful enough to whistle. He was employed at the Ministry of Magic, and his father hadn't handed him the job. He was *needed*. Sirius had made that very clear, telling Ron that he shouldn't take the job if he didn't want to be heavily depended upon, because "as soon as you're full time, I'm going to work you into the ground. Are you *sure* you don't mind quitting the pub?" Ron grinned to himself, at the memory. He hadn't thought twice about quitting, and though it had been a wrench to tell Goldie, the old man had flashed his gold-toothed smile and given Ron a hearty pat on the back. "You vill be makink sometink of yourself, young Veesley. I am not surprised." Ron's letter to Hermione had been ecstatic, and he still couldn't quite believe his own enthusiasm. The work Sirius had been asking him to do was hardly glamorous; Ron had been hunched over books and old parchment for hours at a time, poring over details until his eyes swam with exhaustion. But he loved it. He actually loved it. And better than that, he knew he was *good* at it. It filled him with a sense of significance that was greatly unfamiliar, but not at all unpleasant.

Giving a satisfied sigh, Ron glanced up at the ceiling. It was so good to see it back in place, like an unbroken sunset. It was almost as if it had never been torn apart—as if that battle had never happened—as if students had not stood and fought each other and brought it toppling down. It *felt* good, to see it whole again, as if not only his life but the wizarding world itself was finding new purpose. Tiny stars appeared at the dome's darkening edges, and a half-moon crept slowly up into the fiery sky. Ron watched, glad that Colin had promised him photographs—he knew how much the ceiling's destruction had disturbed Hermione; he wanted to send her pictures of it looking right.

Hermione had been gone for fifty-eight days. *Longest we've ever been apart*, Ron realized suddenly. It was true. Even in the first summers that they'd known each other, they had come together before two months' time to buy books in Diagon Alley. He remembered how different she had looked each year—and yet, how much the same. He wondered how different she would be when she returned from Cortona. She'd be brown all over; that much was certain. And her hair would be lighter, the way it had started to get after their afternoons down by the lake. She'd probably have got herself all calm and serene from meditating—though Ron did not doubt his ability to crack her within hours. But for all her differences, she would still have her expressions, and her way of walking, and just be... Hermione. He missed her terribly, and wished it were Christmas already. He had begged her to let him come to Cortona and visit, but she had stoutly replied that, though she wanted him there very much, it would distract her entirely and just make their separation longer in the end. Ron cursed her for being so bloody responsible—it was painful to know that there were two more months before he would touch her again, and he sometimes wondered how angry she would be if he ignored her request and just went there.

At least he didn't have to worry too much about her state of mind anymore; it sounded like she was finally getting into things with the Thinker, though she had sounded a little forlorn in her last letter. He sat down at the Gryffindor table, which had been put to the side of the room along with the other tables to create a dance floor, and pulled the well-worn folds of parchment out of his pocket.

Dear Ron,

I can't tell you how proud I am to hear about your new job. Although, from the sound of things, you've already been doing it for the past month anyway. I'm not surprised. You've always been good at this sort of thing—remember when you spent all that time doing research to defend Buckbeak? I know it was difficult to tell Goldie, but I'm sure he wants you to do what's best, and I don't think that he was expecting you to work there forever. Besides, it sounds like Ernie MacMillan's brother will do a fine job, and it was really nice of you to find a replacement yourself.

Thinking is finally becoming interesting. I can now meditate for two hours every day, and I've managed to conceive some very simple spells afterwards without the use of any books, so that's something, I suppose. Delia's had me practicing on little things. The other day I created a small, but powerful spell to keep a pomegranate safe from invasion by gnats and flies. Such charms do already exist, of course, but mine had to be specific to that particular pomegranate and Delia had to be unable to break it through obvious methods. She said that it was probably impenetrable, though the best test is to consult a professional Charm or Curse Breaker. When I get home, will you ask Bill to try and break my spells for me, so I can see if they work as well as I think they do?

I'm sad not to be there for Halloween, but I'm delighted to hear that they will be able to restore the ceiling in the Great Hall without too much trouble. I hated thinking of it like it was all summer-caved in and horrible. Actually, Delia told me that Professor McGonagall wrote to her for assistance, and that she is the one who actually came up with the spell to allow the magic from the undamaged portion to flow into the new sections. So you'll have to be very observant and tell me everything that happens, because not only am I curious, but Delia is as well...

You know what else is curious?

Ron got his mental image of her fixed in his mind, and was just getting to his favorite part of the letter when Harry sat down opposite him. He folded the parchment hastily to hide Hermione's next words, stuffed it back in his pocket, and flashed a smile. "All right, Harry?"

Harry merely nodded.

He was lying, and Ron knew it—he tried to put Hermione out of his mind for a moment. Since moving into the Notch, he'd hardly seen Harry. Of course, in the beginning, they'd both been busy; Ron's time had been filled with sleeping, helping Sirius, and working at the Snout's Fair, while Harry had been sleeping, riding dragons, and spending time with Ginny. He'd understood when Harry had refused to go to the Cannons game; he hadn't really expected Harry to want to come,

although he had been a little disappointed. Charlie had gone with him instead, and they'd had a smashing time, but Ron hadn't been able to help feeling a little bit jealous of his younger sister—he and Hermione hadn't been that exclusive of Harry, had they?

And then there had been that incident with the Dementors the week before. Ron had returned home late from a double shift at the pub to find Harry asleep on the sofa, but fully dressed in his dragon-riding clothes. The next morning, he'd woken early to go and help Sirius—Harry had already left, and Sirius, looking manic, had told Ron what he had observed at Azkaban. Dementors had ganged up on Harry; his dragon wasn't safe, Sirius had said. Ron had, of course, pressed Harry for details, but when Harry had stalked into his room without answering, Ron had given up. He knew Harry too well; pushing him to talk would just make him retreat even further—a lesson that Ginny had yet to learn. She'd been at their house every day for the past week, and Harry had feigned sleep every time—or at least he hadn't opened his door.

"Butterbeer?" Ron asked, holding out a bottle to Harry. Harry shook his head. "I've got to work tonight. I can only stay for a little while longer."

Ron looked at his watch. He started to crack a joke about Norbert and his early life in a tavern, but caught himself, realizing that Harry probably wouldn't laugh. The evening had started early—Professor McGonagall and the Hogwarts faculty had begun the festivities by initiating the spell to resurrect the ceiling in the Great Hall, and now it was not quite six-thirty. The house-elves had already proven that they were still as talented as ever, and Ron was quite full from the assortment of food he'd managed to sample. There had been steaming pumpkin pasties, miniature shepherd's pies, Cornish hens, crispy roast potatoes, and an assortment of other treats. Dessert was still on the tables, and Ron reached for another éclair before turning to watch the dancing couples in the middle of the floor. His brothers were out there: Bill with someone who must have been in his class long ago, George with Penelope, Fred with Angelina—Charlie wasn't there, but Ron spotted Mick O'Malley dancing with Lavender's sister. Even his mum and dad were quite good dancers, and moved gracefully to the sharp, warped sounds of traditional wizard promenades, which were being performed by the official Ministry Chamber Quartet.

"Hi, Ron. Harry." Neville Longbottom sat down at their table when there was a break in the music, his cheeks rosy from having just danced with Parvati Patil.

"Neville," said Ron, handing him the Butterbeer that Harry had just refused. "How's it going?"

"Everything's good," he said, sitting back in his chair and looking quite at ease in grander robes than Ron had ever seen worn by anyone his age. The scarlet over-sleeves were heavy and doubly layered with enormous trimmed wrists, and the hat he wore was properly crooked. Neville was really starting to get professorial. "I think everyone's having a good time—it's nice to see the Great Hall full again, don't you think?"

Ron nodded, and tried not to be bothered by the fact that Harry was staring off into space. "It looks great in here," he said encouragingly to Neville. "Did you have a hand in starting up that spell? I couldn't see—too many people."

"Yeah," Neville said, half-grinning with pride. "I did. Professor McGonagall said we'd never get the ceiling back to normal without everyone's assistance. It's amazing that it only took four people to set it in motion when Hogwarts first opened, isn't it?" He smiled up at the half-moon, which crawled steadily upwards, then sat up straight, seeming to remember something. "Did you notice that Fleur Delacour is here?" he whispered, motioning across the room to where Professor McGonagall was standing. The two appeared to be involved in a deep conversation.

Just as Ron set his eyes on her, Fleur turned and stared directly at them. A moment later, both she and Professor McGonagall approached their table, and although he felt his ears burning red, Ron was surprised to notice that his mind remained relatively clear. He certainly didn't have the urge to ask her to go on a date with him. He'd noticed it the last time he'd seen her in Madam Malkin's, with Bill—he'd hardly done anything stupid at all. Perhaps he was building up a resistance to veela as he got older.

"Ello, Ron! 'Arry!" Fleur's voice was certainly very pretty; it reminded Ron of bells ringing. He jumped up and pulled out a chair for her to sit in, saw Professor McGonagall roll her eyes, and quickly pulled out another chair for her.

"It's not necessary, Weasley," said the Headmistress, sarcasm heavy in her voice. "Do sit down." She turned to Neville. "Mr. Longbottom, I believe you know Miss Delacour—she was, of course, one of the Triwizard champions. She has a few questions for you, if you would be so kind..."

"For me?" Neville repeated, looking somewhat amazed.

"No, for the *other* Mr. Longbottom at the table—" Professor McGonagall's voice was harsh, but Ron thought he saw amusement in her eyes. "If you will excuse me, Miss Delacour?"

"Thank you very much, 'Eadmistress."

After McGonagall had walked away, Fleur flashed a bright smile at Ron, "Are those the new robes that you were buying when I saw you? They are very handsome."

Now Ron did feel a bit light in the head. Did Fleur's hair really *glow* like that, or was it just the light from the enormous jack-o-lantern above the table reflecting onto it? And her English seemed to be improving—she must be very clever.

Fleur turned to Harry. "I saw you last week when I returned to Azkaban to make sure that the charms were still good—You 'ave been unsafe?" she asked.

"No, no—" Harry replied, with more animation than Ron had seen from him in a week. "It's not that bad."

Still smiling widely, Fleur turned to address Neville, who looked afraid. "Mr. Longbottom, would you dance with me? I 'ave many questions about 'Ogwarts, and I am told you can answer them."

She led a rather dazed-looking Neville onto the dance floor, before he could even answer.

"Wonder what all that's about, eh, Harry?" Ron said, waggling his eyebrows.

Harry smiled a little.

Well, there's a start, thought Ron. Encouraged by this small step, he began to talk.

"I'll miss working at the pub," he said neutrally, taking a swig of Butterbeer, "and I told Goldie that I'd be around to help him in a pinch if he needed it—but it's great working for Sirius, he's given me a lot of responsibility."

"Yeah," said Harry, sounding too casual, as if he were keeping his irritation in check. Ron followed Harry's gaze and his eyes came to Sirius; he was across the room talking with Penelope, who was flushed from dancing and looked healthier than she had in a long time. She'd brought baby Leo with her, and he slept soundly in Ginny's arms.

Harry looked away, and Ron glanced over at him, wondering what was going on between his best friend and his sister. He hadn't been quite able to understand why they were fighting, and no one seemed willing to tell him, especially not Ginny or Harry. Even Sirius had only said, mysteriously, "They'll tell you when they're ready," and Ron found himself getting annoyed. There was no reason to be secretive—weren't they all friends?

"Hey Harry," he attempted, trying to sound upbeat. "You want to go have a look at the Quidditch field? For old time's sake?"

Harry didn't answer.

Ron waved a hand in front of his face. "Harry? Hello?"

"Huh?" Harry looked truly surprised, as if he hadn't been ignoring Ron on purpose. Ron repeated his question.

Harry pushed up his glasses. "Oh. Er, I don't think so. I've got to fly in about an hour anyway."

"We don't have to fly, we can just go look. The goal posts are back up and I just saw Fred and George walk out of here—ten to one there's a game on."

"I don't feel like flying," said Harry pointedly. He pushed his chair back. "I should go."

Ron felt his anger bubble to the surface, and suddenly, whether he knew Harry well or not no longer mattered—he didn't feel like being patient with any more moods. He banged his hand down on the table and leaned forward, aware that Hermione would not have approached things in this way. But then, she wasn't here.

"What the bloody *hell* is wrong with you?" Ron demanded.

Harry narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms, but did not get up. "Why?"

Ron made an impatient sound. "You've been moping around, you look like hell, and you made Ginny cry last week. You *know* she's been coming over, and I know you haven't been asleep, and I bloody hate answering for you."

"Yeah, well..."

"Is that all you can say? What happened with you two? First you can barely look at each other, then you're all over each other—"

"Shut up, Ron."

"—and now you're just sitting here at opposite ends of the room being dismal? Whatever it is, can't you just have it out?"

"No." Harry didn't seem willing to give forth any other information.

Ron made an inarticulate noise of exasperation. "I don't get it!" he said. "Why can't you just yell at each other and be done with it?"

"That's not how it works."

"Believe me, Harry, that's *just* how it works."

Harry looked like he wanted very badly to say something, but was fighting to keep quiet. Ron

didn't want him to be quiet—he thought he might continue to provoke him until Harry just let it all out, even if it happened right here in the Great Hall, in the middle of Halloween. Anyway, he hadn't had a good row since Hermione had left for Cortona. He was about to give Harry a little more inside information on relationships with women, when there was a loud crackling sound beside them that made them both jump in their seats. Ron turned and found he was staring at a pair of overlarge eyes, which were focused worshipfully on Harry.

"Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby nearly swooned. "A very happy Halloween!" Dobby turned to Ron, and jumped up and down several times, his ears flopping, and his expression ecstatic. "Mr. Wheezy sir! Dobby wishes you a Happy Halloween as well!" His limpid eyes filled with sudden tears. "I know you are still bravely loyal to Harry Potter, sir."

Ron gave Harry a dark look. "So far," he muttered.

"Are those new socks, Dobby?" asked Harry, ignoring Ron and pointing to Dobby's feet, each of which was adorned in a brightly-colored knit sock.

"Yes indeed, sir," Dobby said happily, kicking up his feet one at a time. One sock had glow-in-the-dark skeletons dancing in circles around his ankle, and the other was white, with spiders on it. The spiders were enchanted, and looked as if they were weaving thick black webs around his foot.

Ron squirmed. "Look, Harry," he interrupted, "I'm going to go and look at the Quidditch field—just promise you'll come out and have a look with me when you two are done, all right?"

"Fine," said Harry. "You go. I'll catch up."

Ron wasn't sure if Harry meant it or not, but he decided not to second-guess him. He left the table and headed across the room to Ginny, who was stroking the bridge of Leo's nose while he slept.

"Look how tiny he is," she said to Ron, when he got close enough to hear her whisper.

Ron didn't answer right away—Sirius was still talking with Penelope; they were going over the flaws in different existing imprisonment methods and the history of prison charms which had been abandoned.

"... and what happened when they did that?" Sirius asked eagerly.

"Well, several prisoners learned how to use telepathy. There's very little that can't be done, if one is willing to use Dark magic to do it—that's the main trouble. Their bodies were imprisoned, but their minds were free to wreak havoc. Telepathic interference from convicted criminals is what actually caused the Battle at the Baths in 683..."

Trying not to get sucked into the conversation, which he actually found quite interesting, Ron sat down next to his sister, who had just put her nose in Leo's fuzzy hair. Her eyes were focused in Harry's general direction.

"Hey Gin," Ron said cheerfully. She didn't respond. "Ginny?" he nudged her slightly in the ribs.

She sighed and straightened up, smoothing Leo's hair back down. "What's up?" she asked, leaving her gaze where it was.

"Er..." Ron realized that he wasn't sure what to say. But he did know that sitting around not talking was no way to solve a problem. He knew from experience that Harry was just as good at holding a grudge as any member of his own family. "Nothing," he finally said, and then added, "You look like you need to wake up. You want to go and get some air? See the Quidditch field?"

She looked at him as if he were a little mad. "Now?"

"They've put up the new goalposts, and people are out playing, and besides, Harry won't go with me."

Concern was evident in Ginny's face, but she said casually; "He won't?"

Ron nodded over to where Harry was actually laughing at something Dobby was saying. "No, he says he has to fly in an hour anyway, and now he's busy with Dobby."

Ginny shrugged. "All right," she said, and Ron reached to take Leo from her arms. "No, I want to hold him—Penny, can I take him on a walk?"

"Yes—but it's a bit chilly. Here, hold on a minute." Penelope raised her wand and brought an enormous shoulder bag flying toward her. She rummaged in it for a long time before coming up with a thick blanket and an extra pair of baby socks. Ginny put on her own cloak while Penelope wrapped up the baby, and then took Leo back into her arms.

"But you can't bring him," Ron told Ginny, feeling a little frantic.

"Why? I'm not going to fly or anything." Ginny hefted Leo more comfortably into the crook of her elbow and tucked the blanket around his head.

"He could get hit by a Bludger."

Penelope looked sufficiently alarmed, but Ginny turned and scoffed. "Ron, don't be stupid—and don't scare Penny. We all went to Quidditch pitches when we were little, and never got hit. It's not

like I'm going to walk him into the middle of the field and besides, the air will be good for him." She smiled at their sister-in-law. "See you in a bit."

"Well..." Penelope bit her lip.

"Ginny's right," Sirius said quickly. "She's got Leo, you don't have to worry—now what I want to know is, what's stopping us from using individualized Binding Spells in lieu of faulty imprisonments?"

Penny nodded permission to Ginny and returned her attention to Sirius.

Ron scowled, but steered Ginny across the room to the far doors and through the entrance hall, out to the Hogwarts grounds. It was dark outside, but a row of jack-o-lanterns had been placed on the ground to form a path to the newly finished Quidditch pitch. As they walked nearer, Ron could make out what looked like at least two teams of people flying around on broomsticks.

"I knew they'd be playing," he said delightedly to Ginny. They paused at the edge, near the stands, and watched as people zoomed overhead—Ron waved as Fred, George, and Angelina flew by. "Wonder if Fred'll let me borrow his broom for a few minutes," Ron said, squinting upwards. "Feel like flying, Ginny? I'll take Leo." He nudged Ginny again with his elbow, but frowned and looked down at her when he realized that she was standing very stiffly and had gone so pale that her face almost glowed in the dark. She stared into the center of the pitch and leaned against Ron for support.

"What is it?" Ron asked at once. "Here, give me the baby."

But Ginny didn't stir. "Hello, Harry," she said very quietly.

Ron looked over his shoulder and gaped to see that Ginny was right; Harry was standing several meters away, frozen much as Ginny was. He flashed an angry glance at Ron, crossed his arms, and then shot a defiant look at the back of Ginny's head. She didn't turn around.

"Right," said Ron. They were probably both angry with him, but they'd thank him in the morning. "You're both here—now have it out. Whatever you're fighting about isn't worth it. Trust me. Ginny, look at Harry."

Ginny took an enormous breath, and with what seemed like obvious effort, rotated slowly where she was standing, in order to face in Harry's direction. But she didn't look at him; she glared up at Ron instead, trembling slightly. "You must be *joking*," she nearly hissed. "Get *away*, Ron—this isn't any of your business."

"Harry," ordered Ron, feeling very satisfied with himself, "Come here and talk to my sister."

"I can't," said Harry, looking equally furious.

"What do you mean you *can't*?" Ron asked, annoyed. He couldn't believe how stubborn Harry was sometimes. "You've got two legs—get over here."

"No, Ron," said Ginny softly, hugging Leo close to her chest. "He really can't."

* * * * *

"Can't my arse," was Ron's helpful reply. "You're both daft."

Ginny gritted her teeth and forced her arms to stay relaxed so that she wouldn't hurt Leo. Ron had never done anything to embarrass her so much as this—not since he had first betrayed to Harry that she liked him, in her first year. "You're so lucky my hands are full," she muttered. He chuckled infuriatingly. "I'm not joking. You're a—" And she called Ron something that made Harry's stare turn from angry to amazed— and maybe just a little bit amused.

"Oh for God's sake, lighten up," Ron returned. "Here, give me Leo—"

But Ginny kept tight hold of her nephew. If Ron was this idiotic, then she didn't trust him not to drop the baby right in the lake. "Leave," she said, working to keep the heat out of her face. "Now."

There was a long, strained silence, and in it, Ginny tried to get hold of her mind; it had frozen in her head when Harry had approached. He stood there now, close enough to talk to, but Ginny couldn't think of a word to say. He looked terrible. His face was shadowed and drawn, and even his eyes seemed strangely dull; the past week and a half had muted their usual, startling color.

A strong wind circled suddenly around the pitch, blowing back her cloak and making Leo stir. She tucked a thin layer of blanket loosely across his face, to keep him warm.

"Never mind," Ron said abruptly, sounding truly irritated. "If you're both going to stand here like you've been Muting Charmed, it's fine with me." He turned to walk away.

"I want to talk," Ginny said faintly. She searched Harry's eyes, but they made her feel empty; in them, she couldn't find any trace of the few weeks they'd spent as... Come to think of it, Ginny still wasn't sure what they had been. Neither had ever brought it up in words.

"I don't," Harry replied. He looked up, away from her face. She could tell by the movements of his eyes that he was studying the mock Quidditch match above them, but she also knew he wasn't

really watching.

"Then don't," she said. "I'm not asking you to say anything. But you could give me a chance to explain."

"You don't have to," Harry said, still looking into the sky. "I get it. It's fine."

"Oh, would you stop saying that!" Ginny snapped, before she'd thought about it. "It's so old, Harry!"

His chin came down and he gave her a vaguely shocked look. "What?"

"You say that every time you don't feel like talking," Ginny pointed out, a little ruthlessly. "It doesn't fool anyone, you know."

Harry stared at her. "That's not true."

"Isn't it? Okay, then—how are you feeling tonight, Harry? *Honestly?*"

He opened and shut his mouth several times before spluttering; "Fine!"

Ginny narrowed her eyes at him—there were many scathing things she wanted to say in response to that, but she bit her tongue. It was still Harry, and they hadn't been intimate for very long. She still wasn't sure, for all her Empathy, just how to approach him when he walled himself off. A voice deep in her mind told her that it would be good for both of them if she continued to speak bluntly, but she tried to be gentle instead. "You're not fine," she said, taking an unwitting step towards him.

He stepped immediately back. "Don't," he said sharply. "You know you're not allowed to touch me."

Ron made a noise that sounded like muffled laughter; Ginny flushed. She had forgotten he was there.

"That's more like it," Ron said, sounding insufferably experienced. He patted Ginny's shoulder. "You'll be fine," he informed them, before striding off into the center of the field, looking as though he'd just done a great service, and got into a conversation with Fred.

"Bighead Boy," Ginny said under her breath.

"Smug bastard," Harry muttered at the same time.

Both of them laughed, but they cut their laughter short and glanced at each other. For a second, the color seemed to come back into Harry's eyes; they flashed at her, and Ginny seized the moment.

"Please let me tell you why I kept the Healing secret," she said quickly. "Don't ignore me—you have a right to be upset, and you *do* deserve an explanation, so please, Harry. Let me talk."

Harry crossed his arms, but his face was suddenly much less guarded. His eyes shifted to Leo, and he shrugged in acceptance.

"I was worried," Ginny said honestly, wishing she could touch him while she spoke. She knew that just putting her hand on his arm would get the point across much better than words could. "I thought it might upset you to know that I can sense all your feelings. I thought it would seem like... an invasion of privacy."

Harry pursed his mouth a little, and shrugged again.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," she offered. "Don't stay angry."

There was a silence while Harry searched her eyes. "Can you really sense my feelings?" he said. His voice rasped slightly.

"Yes," Ginny admitted, encouraged. He was talking. That was good. "I'm not trying to, I swear—it's just that once I opened up to this thing I have, everything flooded in and hit me all at once—you can't imagine how strange it is. If you'd just let me tell you what I'm trying to learn, then perhaps—"

"I read the book," Harry interrupted, and pushed his glasses up.

"You only read the parts—"

"I read the *book*," Harry repeated. "I have a copy."

Ginny stared at him. "You got a copy of your own?" she asked, and her heart sped up when he reddened and nodded. "But when did you have time to read it?"

Harry flushed more deeply. "I put it on *Aura Libris* while I was up on Norbert."

"Oh, Harry." Despite the pain she knew it would cause, Ginny wanted to hug him. He had a copy of her textbook, and he'd made the book read itself aloud to him. Her eyes stung, and she wished she had given Leo to Ron; she wanted her arms back. "That was really good of you—"

Harry waved her off. "I wanted to know what the hell you were doing to me," he said, his voice sharp. "And I don't get Empathy at all."

Ginny nodded. It was a difficult magic to understand, and there was a lot that still escaped her. "Which part don't you get?"

Harry hesitated and looked defensively at her. "You can't control it?" he asked.

"I can a little—I'm pretty good with plants."

"But with people." Harry pushed up his glasses again. "Like-with-well, you're around Sirius a lot."

"Yes." It had hurt to be in the same room with Sirius last week, when he'd come home from Azkaban. "He has a very strong history—very powerful and dark—I always know when he's there."

"But do you—" Harry seemed to be searching for words. He looked terribly frustrated. "Can you be around him?" he finally asked.

"Yes."

Harry avoided her eyes. "But not me," he said.

Ginny ached at the hurt in his voice. "I don't know why," she said quietly, stepping towards him again, and this time, he didn't recoil. "I don't know. It's not the same. I haven't tried to *do* anything for Sirius, so maybe that's part of it."

"But you've made Wolfsbane Potion for Remus," Harry said. His voice was low and quick, and Ginny realized that these questions must have been building up in him for the last ten days, ever since he'd found her out. "You can be around him."

"I know."

"And that doesn't drain you?"

"It does," Ginny said truthfully. "Don't you remember the first time I made the potion? I thought I was going to be sick."

"But he doesn't hurt you."

"No—not like that."

Harry looked right at her. "Not like *me*," he corrected grimly.

"I don't know why," she repeated. "I only have guesses." When Harry didn't answer, she realized he was waiting for her to continue. "I... noticed it happened both times when we... when you kissed me."

Harry's cheeks colored. "I kissed you more than twice."

"Not... like that. Not the same thing. When we—when you—" Ginny made a noise of frustration. She was never going to clear things up if she kept acting like a twelve-year-old. She took a breath, held tightly to Leo, and made herself speak like an adult. "I think the trouble is that when I open up to you physically, I take everything on—all of your past and, well, just *you*, Harry. When you're near me like that, I don't want to shut it out, I just want to let you—" Ginny blushed at herself, and at Harry's sudden change in expression. His chest rose and fell rapidly and he looked half-panicked and half like he might launch himself at her. She forced herself to continue, rapidly telling him everything she'd been theorizing for a week. "I open up to you as much as possible, because that's just... that's just how it is for me. And I don't know, but I think you do the same thing—I think you forget to hold back. You kiss me, and you forget to pretend you're fine, and then everything you keep hidden comes pouring right into me, because I'm too open, and I have this stupid gift that I don't even want—" Ginny stopped, and realized she was panting slightly. She had never wanted to touch him so much.

Harry looked powerfully dazed by this speech; his hands were clenched and his eyes were fixed on her. Ginny gazed back at him, tired of talking. She just wanted to go to him, and she might have done it if the baby hadn't needed both her hands—it wasn't right to stand back from Harry and talk so clinically about the way he made her feel. The wind circled inside the stands again and blew the blanket away from Leo's face. Ginny unthinkingly put it back, not taking her eyes from Harry.

"Can he breathe like that?" Harry asked quietly.

"Yes," Ginny answered at once, glad for the change of subject. "You just keep it loose like this." She showed him, lifting the blanket and putting it back in place. "It's to keep his face from getting too cold, because heads and feet are so sensitive, especially on babies."

"Oh." Harry edged closer. "Won't he freeze out here?"

"No, he's got a little jumper and extra socks and everything, and the blanket's temperature regulated—you know, they charm them especially for infants. He'll be fine." Ginny pulled back the blanket and felt his nose to be sure. "He's all warm," she announced, and nuzzled the baby's fine cloud of hair. "I love holding Leo," she murmured. "He has no fears and no pains and no history. He feels wonderful, to me. He's a relief."

Harry cleared his throat. "I know I... my history or—or whatever—I..." He paused, looking helpless. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

Ginny looked up at him and quickly shook her head. "It's not your fault," she said. "Not even a little bit. And I should have told you before it ever happened."

"It still happened." He raked back his hair and when it fell down on his forehead again, it parted over his scar. Ginny couldn't take her eyes off it. "So," he said, gesturing at nothing. "We can

never... I mean, if it's going to make you convulse, then..."

"I'll get better at it," Ginny said vehemently. "I'll learn to control it. It can't take that long, and then we—"

"How's it going, you two?"

Ginny whirled toward Angelina's voice; both she and Fred were standing just beside them. Ginny shot her brother a meaningful look, which he chose to ignore.

"Lovely evening for a stroll, eh, Harry?" Fred said wickedly, winking at him. "Mind you get our girl home by daybreak at the very latest—"

"Fred," Angelina warned. "We're going in," she told them. "Wanted to know if either of you wanted my broom so you could fly for a bit. Ron's already taken Fred's, so there's only one."

"No thanks," Harry said.

"That's all right," Ginny agreed, "but would you mind taking Leo? He's getting heavy and I think his mum will want him."

Fred forgot to tease them any further; he held out his arms for his nephew and made an idiot out of himself fussing with the blankets. "Ickle Leo is coldie woldie," he gibbered. "Isn't he? Does him need to go back inside? Hmmm?"

Angelina looked a little worried, and towed Fred away by the sleeve of his robes. "Are you going to act like that towards our children?" Ginny heard her demand as they were swallowed up by the pumpkin-lit darkness. Her question was followed by a decided: "*Children?*" before they disappeared entirely.

Ginny laughed, glad to have her hands free, and was glad to see Harry laughing, too. In the dark, it was hard to see his lines and shadows. He looked young, and normal, and happy. And he was looking at her.

"I've missed you," she told him on impulse.

He lifted a hand toward her, but didn't seem to know what to do with it.

"What is it, Harry?"

He looked chagrined. "I don't want to hurt you," he said, pulling his hand back again.

Ginny understood. "I think it's all right just to..." she trailed off and moved toward him. Harry hesitated, but only for a moment; when Ginny lightly rested her hands on his shoulders, he carefully slipped his arms around her waist. She sighed, relaxed, and let him pull her close. "Yes, that's fine," she mumbled into his robes, relief flooding her. "This is all right."

Harry rocked her a little bit and she let her arms slide around his neck. Cold air brushed across them, moving the skirt of Ginny's dress robes around her ankles. She shivered a little, and burrowed closer to Harry. She felt a dim, unpleasant, panging sensation in her stomach.

"You can't sense anything?" he asked, after a moment.

Ginny could. She felt his heartbeat, for one thing; it pulsed quickly against her own. She could also feel fear, exhaustion and grief, but decided to answer diplomatically. "I can tell you're having trouble with the Dementors."

"But it isn't painful to *you*."

She sighed. She didn't want to lie; it had worked out so badly, the last time she'd hidden something from him. He'd find out eventually anyway. "It hurts a little," she admitted, and Harry tried to pull away from her but she clamped her arms around him. "No, don't. Or I'll never get used to it."

"I don't want you to get used to it."

"I *have* to, by degrees, and build up a tolerance, and learn some sort of control," she explained. "It's all right. I'll tell you when it's not." But though Ginny was working to protect herself as much as possible, her head was already very light, and her stomach had begun to hurt—just slightly—the way it had done in her first few days with Harry. Eventually, if history was anything to go by, she would grow fatigued and sick. And then she would forget to protect herself, and possibly lose consciousness. Possibly cause herself real damage. But she tried to ignore those facts for one more second, because having to let Harry go was in some ways much more painful than having him close.

From far off and above, she thought she heard someone catcall at them, but neither of them stirred.

"Too bad Gryffindor Tower's off limits," Harry said.

Ginny tried to smile, but his energy was getting the better of her. Ten days he'd gone without releasing his edge—ten days of dragon riding and Dementors that she hadn't been able to help with—and now it was emptying out. He didn't have to kiss her to do it. He was simply relaxing and letting her in—no one else had this effect. Ginny scrunched her eyes shut and tried to fight it off. But she couldn't, and she didn't understand it, and there was no one in the world that she could ask for an

explanation.

He kissed her cheek very gently and Ginny felt a throb of happiness and one of nausea mingle together in her chest. *Unfair*, she shouted silently, and hugged him tightly. "Damn," she mumbled. "Damn, damn, damn."

Harry breathed a sigh into her hair, and cursed as well. "It's too much on you, isn't it." It wasn't a question.

"Yes," Ginny said angrily. "Damn it." She lifted her face and looked at him, wanting more of him and knowing that it wasn't going to work. She needed to kiss him. She *would* kiss him. She tilted up her chin.

"No—don't hurt yourself—" but Harry didn't pull away fast enough. Ginny took his face in her hands and pressed her mouth to his. Instantly, his hands gripped her waist and he kissed her back with the same fierceness. Just as instantly, the knot in her stomach intensified, her brain clenched, and Ginny began to sweat and shake; out of the corner of her eye she thought she saw a flashing light, and though it was the last thing in the world she wanted to do, she had to let him go. She might have fallen if his hands hadn't steadied her.

"Can you stand?" he demanded.

"Not yet." She winced.

"Why did you—Ginny—"

"You know why."

Harry went quiet and held onto her until she was able to step away on her own. "I think a few people saw that," he said, looking up.

Ginny hugged herself. "I don't care."

"Neither do I." Harry watched her for a long moment, and then squared his shoulders. "Now what?" he asked faintly.

"I don't know," she answered, soaking in the way he was looking at her. It made her feel... desired. It made it twice as difficult to stand out of his reach. "I'll work this out." She reached out her hand to him on impulse, froze when she realized what she was doing, and slowly pulled her hand back. "It'll work out," she repeated quietly, looking right at him, her hand still partly suspended in air between them. "It *will*, because I—" she choked, slightly. It was harder to talk about love, when there was no *Expecto Sacrificum* to complete. "I-care about you so much," she finished.

Harry didn't answer. He tilted his head to the side and observed her, chewing on the inside of his mouth and frowning slightly, as if he was trying to work out something important. He took a quick breath as if to speak—then paused.

"What?" Ginny prompted at once.

"That part in the book," Harry began, but he stopped and shook his head. "No, never mind."

Ginny tried to smile. "Not fair, you can't do *that*—now you have to tell me—"

"No." And Harry looked as if he really couldn't. He glanced apologetically at her, then seemed to remember something—his eyes widened and he looked at his watch. "I'm late," he said, sounding panicked. "And I'm not dressed."

"It's all right—"

"No, it's not. It's Charlie's shift I'm taking over."

"But I want to ask you about the dragons—Sirius said something about Norbert being sick and I want to make sure—"

"I'm okay." Harry met her eyes and nodded as if to reassure her. "Honestly, it was a fluke accident—they checked him and he's perfectly safe. There's a virus that dragons can get—like a quick flu—it makes them really difficult to handle. Mick thinks it might've been that. Norbert's fine to ride."

Ginny knew he was telling the truth, but she didn't want to let him go. It took all of her self-possession not to argue with him to stay. "Quick, then," she said, trying to sound like she meant it. "We'll try to talk later."

"Thanks," Harry said. He stepped up, took her arm, and bent his head naturally toward hers. Ginny had almost kissed him goodbye when she felt a bad pain in her stomach. At the same moment, Harry seemed to realize his proximity to her; he pulled hastily back. "Sorry," he muttered. "I forgot."

"No, it's fine," Ginny said, though her body was tense with frustration. "So did I. Go."

He went. Where Harry had just been, there was now empty space.

"Ridiculous," Ginny muttered, clenching her fists and wishing there were someone to punch. The pressure in her body was unbearable. She wanted him to come back, and she wanted to be

able to touch him—the idea of waiting made her feel very nearly violent.

“Hey Ginny!” George called from overhead, waving down at her. “Beater spot’s open—Lee’s going, and he was on a school broom, so you can use it—want to play?”

“Yes!” Ginny yelled, relieved. As soon as she had Lee’s broom and bat, she took off into the sky, forgetting she was in dress robes. “Whose team am I on?”

“Mine,” Ron called from the goal hoops. “Come over here, I’ll tell you what formation we’re playing.”

But when Ginny reached the hoops, Ron said nothing at all about strategy.

“Looks like things are working out then?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “Glad you two sorted out your differences—”

“In front of half the wizarding world,” George chimed in, having sneaked up behind her. He tugged on Ginny’s hair. “Well, who can blame you? He’s got those eyes, hasn’t he? They’re as green as a fresh pickled—”

“SHUT UP—” Ginny whirled and tried to hit him with her bat. When she didn’t succeed, she whirled on Ron, who was laughing, and tried to hit him, too. He dodged and dived, and a bit of something fell out of his pocket. Ginny took aim and dove for it, and was delighted when her hand closed around a thick wad of parchment. “I could’ve been Seeker if school were open this year!” she said happily, and hovered where she was.

“What is that?” Ron asked, flying towards her. “Hey—did that fall out of my—”

“Dear Ron,” Ginny read aloud. “Oh, it’s from Hermione.”

“Give that here,” Ron demanded, holding out his hand. He looked exceptionally pink around the ears.

Grinning, Ginny held the parchment close to her chest. “Why? What could be so bad?” she asked. “It’s just from Hermione—here, George, come see what Hermione has to say to Ron.”

“Certainly,” George said, looking delighted. He flew down and hovered next to Ginny.

“Give it,” Ron said angrily, and lunged for them.

Ginny laughed and dove out of his reach. “Don’t dish out what you can’t take!” she yelled back, and looked down at the letter again. “Sorry you set me up now, aren’t you?”

“Don’t you read a *word*—” Ron warned, looking panicked. “That letter’s *none* of your—”

“Are we playing, or what?” came a voice from across the pitch. “Come on, let’s go, that’s enough strategy back there!”

“We’re ready!” Ginny called back, still looking at the parchment. “Oh, but hello,” she mused, “this looks like a good part. Listen to this, George. ‘You know what’s *curious*?’” she read aloud, affecting Hermione’s proper, breathlessly quick tone of voice.

“What’s curious, Hermione?” George yelled.

Ron blanched. “Don’t—Ginny—”

But Ginny was feeling merciless. “I get into *bed* at night,” she read.

“Oh, bloody hell,” George said, and started laughing. “This is classic.”

Ron growled furiously, and shot towards Ginny—she shrieked, spiraled out of the way, and flew to George, reading loudly: “I get into bed at night, and for a second, every time, I’m absolutely *sure* you’re about to walk in and lie down next to me. It would be the rightest thing in the *world*. You could curl up behind me with your arm around me...*touch* me—”

“Touch me!” George cried, in a high-pitched voice. “Oh, Ron!”

“Right, that’s it, I’ll *kill* you,” Ron yelled, purple in the face, before barreling at Ginny again. This time, he connected with her, nearly sending her off her broom; Ginny gasped and let go of the parchment, afraid she would fall. She clutched the broomstick with both hands and Hermione’s letter fell towards the ground. Ron sped after it, caught it in his hands, and flew immediately to the goal posts where he hovered, looking especially murderous as he tucked the letter under his shirt, pointed his wand at himself, and muttered some sort of spell to keep it from falling again.

“I have a feeling you didn’t even get to the good parts,” George said wistfully to Ginny. “Ah well. It’s enough to torture her with when she gets back—I won’t forget a word of that. Let’s play.” He clapped his bat against Ginny’s and flew off to the opposite side of the pitch.

Ginny threw herself into the game the moment it began, and while she played she felt like herself again, laughing and smacking at Bludgers, working to keep up with her brothers. For a little while there was no Empathy; her mind felt clear and even and her worries seemed to shrink away to nothing. Still, she couldn’t quite forget that, somewhere to the west of them, Harry was flying too, on dragonback, in the darkness. And towards the end of the game, when Ron “accidentally” flew into her for the eleventh or twelfth time, she wondered what Harry would think if she wrote *him* a letter before she went to bed. Not like the one Hermione had apparently written—Ginny snickered

to herself—but if she couldn't touch Harry for awhile, or even share space with him very often, then they were going to have to find another way to communicate. Ginny smiled a little. She didn't have anything in Harry's handwriting—they'd never kept in touch that way, during the summers. Perhaps letters would actually be... rather nice.

Enquiring Minds Want to Know

“Mum? Mu-um?!”

Molly Weasley stood up quickly at the sound of Bill’s voice and banged her head on one of the low rafters in the attic of the Burrow. The ghouel started an old rocking chair in motion, and the photo album that had been on Molly’s lap slid to the floor with a thump. She’d been looking at pictures of her children when they’d been young. For over an hour, she’d laughed and waved and blown kisses back at happy faces of people who couldn’t really see her. Blinking back tears, she pursed her lips and made her way over to the trap door.

She was about to yell down to the kitchen to tell her oldest son to be quiet so as not to wake his nephew, when she realized that her voice had the potential to do the same thing. With a deep sigh, she pulled a wand out of her apron pocket and Apparated downstairs.

Molly needn’t have worried. Leo was already awake. Penelope was stirring the stew that Molly had set cooking in a large cauldron earlier that morning, and Bill had started numerous brightly-colored tea towels dancing in a synchronized pattern above Leo’s head.

Molly looked guiltily at Penelope. “I’m sorry dear—I didn’t mean for you to do that—you have work to do.”

Penelope continued to cheerfully stir the cauldron. Her mood had been much improved in the months following Leo’s birth. All of Molly’s worries about her daughter-in-law had quickly faded as she’d watched mother and son together. Penelope shooed Molly away with her free hand. “Sit,” she said. “Goodness knows you’ve done enough to look after me lately. Besides,” she added, sending an amused look in Bill’s direction, “you must have tired yourself out with those gnomes this morning.”

Molly felt herself blush—something that she did much less frequently than her children.

“Were you de-gnoming the garden, Mum?” Bill laughed, and Leo laughed with him, although it was most likely because a snowman had just jumped out of the scene on the tea towel and pinched him on the nose. “What did Fred and George do this time?”

“Very funny, Bill,” said Molly, crossly, rubbing her upper arms, which were throbbing painfully from her morning exertions. “It needed to be done, and I can’t count on you lot to come by and help me anymore, can I?”

“But you do,” said Bill. “You asked me to do it last weekend and I did. And I told you I’d do it as long as I was in England. ‘I won’t have headlines about the Minister of Magic de-gnoming the garden’ is what you said...”

At the mention of headlines, Molly narrowed her eyes, and remembered the whole reason that she’d had such a terrible day. She reached for a bowl and began to mix together a cake—she’d forgotten that Bill and Charlie were due for supper this evening. And they were eating early to accommodate Charlie’s dragon-riding schedule. She’d hoped to see Arthur before everyone arrived, but Arthur had been in a Diagon Alley Reconstruction meeting since early morning. Rose Brown had assured her from the fireplace that *Charmed Life* was not on the official Ministry subscription list.

That Rose Brown was a pretty girl. “Bill?” she asked, trying to take her mind off of things. “Wasn’t that Rose Brown Head Girl when you were Head Boy? Bill?”

“Huh?” Bill answered. His head was now hidden under a tent of tea towels, and he appeared to be playing “peek-a-boo” with Leo. He came up for air, his long hair falling out of the ponytail and sticking up in odd ways. “Oh, never mind!” said Molly, waving her wand so vigorously that some batter flew out of the bowl and landed in a blob on the table. She wasn’t going to attempt to match-make for him if he couldn’t even be bothered to cut his hair. Molly couldn’t see it, but she had a feeling that the fang earring was still dangling from his ear as well. Maybe she’d have better luck with Charlie. She only hoped that her own boys would be less inclined to gallivant in public

with a girlfriend the way that Harry had with Ginny...

Penelope wandered over to the table to sit across from Bill and Leo. She opened up the *Daily Prophet* with a sigh. After a moment, she said, "I suppose now is the time to buy property in Diagon Alley."

"What?" Molly couldn't imagine this day getting much worse. Was Penelope planning on moving out? "It's too crowded and noisy in Diagon Alley," she said briskly. "Not a good place to raise a child. Arthur and I lived there when we were first married and didn't come here until his mother needed looking after. Bill and Charlie were born there and—"

"And look at us now!" Charlie was standing in the doorway to the kitchen. "Not too shabby."

"I beg to differ," Molly answered with a huff, but she smiled when Charlie leaned down to give her a peck on the cheek. Despite the fact that it was now November and quite cold outside, Charlie was dressed in a T-shirt and his dragon-riding trousers. She wasn't surprised, but decided to keep the bit about Charlie's frequent toddler striptease routines on their balcony in Diagon Alley to herself. That story was best saved for the day he brought a girlfriend home. It was strange, reflected Molly, how children turned out. Charlie had always been adventurous, and she hadn't been surprised when he'd decided to turn his fascination with dragons into a career. For all their wild ways, Molly had been able to read the twins from the beginning, and although they'd been exhausting to bring up, she'd understood them. Percy had always been responsible and quiet, as had Bill. But Bill had gone off to Egypt and returned with that long hair. Now he was near thirty, and showing no signs of settling down, and Molly knew that he really would rather be back in Egypt, or some place else far away from England. Ron had been nothing but surprises from the beginning. For so long, he'd been the "youngest boy" and now he'd played a major role in destroying Voldemort, had a wonderful girlfriend, a promising job *and* he'd only been out of school a few months. And Ginny—well, it was obvious now that she'd had *other* reasons for not wanting to return home to study in September. Molly was going to have a few words with Remus and Sirius when she calmed down just a bit.

"They're selling flats for a Galleon," said Penelope, running her finger along the article, before Molly could begin to fume again. "It's part of this whole reconstruction project. You pay one Galleon for an empty flat, but then you're responsible for all of the repairs and you sign a contract that you must stay there for a minimum of five years."

"That's tiring, fixing up a flat all by yourself," offered Molly, hoping she wasn't being too obvious in trying to discourage Penelope. She loved having Penny and Leo at home to fuss over. Penelope had started her work for the Ministry about a month after Leo's birth—she was able to do most of her work from the Burrow, although recently, she'd left Leo in Molly's care two days a week in order to do research at the Ministry archives. Now that Leo was becoming more mobile, however, it was becoming increasingly difficult for Penelope to concentrate.

"That's really not a bad deal, though," said Bill. "We could all help you—I bet you could find a really nice one on one of the park squares."

"We'll have to ask Arthur about it," said Penelope, folding the newspaper and pushing it towards the center of the table. "What's this?" she asked, pulling at something colorful from underneath the newspaper. "*Charmed Life?*"

"Yeah, Mum has a subscription," chortled Charlie. "There's all sorts of rubbish in there—stuff you wouldn't believe. You know, 'Love Child! Minister Weasley and Canadian Seeker Maureen Knight Hide Secret from Family!' and the like..."

"Charlie!"

"Well, Mum, you have to admit, that Maureen Knight's quite attractive, *and* she's doing quite well for the Cannons."

"Wait, wait," said Bill, holding up a hand. "How about this one? 'Minister's Wife Helps Gilderoy Lockhart Escape from St. Mungo's....'"

Molly groaned. The Lockhart jokes were growing old.

"Or," Bill continued, "High Headmaster: Lifetime Supply of Billywig Stings Found in Albus Dumbledore's Secret Vault."

"Simply the Best: Harry Potter Enjoys Life in the Arms of the Minister's Seductive Daughter," read Penelope. Molly felt her stomach somersault. It didn't feel any better than it had the first time she'd heard it.

"Good one!" said Charlie, laughing. "William Weasley Caught in Goblin/Veela Love Triangle..." but his voice trailed off and his eyes widened when Penelope held up the magazine for him to see. Molly looked away. She didn't need to see it again.

"What the hell?" All amusement was gone from Charlie's voice. "Mum? Have you seen this?"

She nodded.

"What?" asked Bill. "Let's have a look!"

But Charlie cleared his throat and read aloud in a shaky voice:

"Simply the Best: Harry Potter Enjoys Life in the Arms of the Minister's Seductive Daughter. It seems that the Boy Who Lived is working on improving his life since he saved the world in June, writes N. Flummery, special reporter for Charmed Life. On Halloween, Potter exchanged more than just conversation with Ginny Weasley, the attractive only daughter of the Minister of Magic. The couple grew close while spending the summer together at the home of former Hogwarts professor Remus Lupin."

"Well?" asked Bill, looking perplexed. "What's wrong with that? It's sort of sweet, I think." He turned to address Molly. "No need to worry, Mum," he said, sounding authoritative, "it's all very innocent. Harry's a proper gentleman."

Charlie turned the magazine around so that Bill could see the accompanying photograph.

He turned pale, and yanked it from his brother's grasp. After a brief inspection, he threw it on the table in disgust.

"I mean, can they *publish* that?" Charlie's hands were now balled up into fists.

"It's not real," Penelope said calmly. "I mean, they were probably, er, kissing or something, but you know, there're special potions to make the people in the photographs react certain ways. It's even possible to place a sort of love charm on a photograph."

"I know that," said Charlie. "But, I mean, she's *attacking* him. And he's got his hand ... I think I'm going to be sick."

"At least they've still got their clothes on," joked Penelope. Three pairs of angry Weasley eyes turned to her. She shrugged and picked up the magazine again.

Just then, the clock on the wall made the grinding noise that it was wont to do whenever any of the hands moved. A moment later, Arthur and Sirius were standing in the kitchen.

"Lo, dear," said Arthur, giving Molly a kiss and then rubbing his hands together. "Dinner ready?"

"It will be soon," she said, and then, because she couldn't hold it in any longer, marched past them both and grabbed her copy of *Charmed Life* from the table. She thrust it at Sirius, who looked confused, and took the magazine out of her hand. Sirius unfolded it and after looking at the front page, raised his eyebrows and laughed.

"You think this is funny!" Molly cried, exasperated. "Well, I can see he's got a lovely role model, then."

Sirius shrugged. "I've already seen it. Ron showed it to me this morning."

"Ron did?" She hoped Ron hadn't gone off and done anything too rash. The usual twinge of anxiety that she felt whenever she knew Harry to be in any sort of danger surfaced, but she pushed it out of her mind.

"What is it?" Arthur asked, hesitantly. "Do I want to know?"

"Maybe you should sit down," said Molly, throwing what she hoped was a vicious look in Sirius's direction.

"It's not a big deal," said Sirius, leaning against the wall and crossing his arms. "Ron seemed quite pleased. Said they'd had some sort of row but that he helped patch it up. I'm just glad to see them both enjoying themselves."

Molly's mouth fell open, although she pursed her lips again when she heard a snort from behind her. "Arthur Weasley, don't you dare laugh. This is very, very serious!"

But the Minister of Magic's lips were curved into a smile. Bill laughed, although Charlie still looked rather pale. "Molly," said Arthur, soothingly, reaching out to grab hold of her skirt and pulling her onto the bench next to him. "I'm not going to hang the photograph in the hall next to the picture of Uncle Bilius, but Sirius is right—at least they both seem happy. And anyway," he continued, putting an arm around her, "that article was written by Flummery; she's been fired by the *Prophet*."

"Well, then, I'm not surprised," said Bill, sounding a bit relieved. "Can't trust a word she writes. Who took that picture, Dad?"

"Photograph by Crispin R. Peltier," read Arthur, his eyes scanning the name below the picture—and Molly was pleased to note that, for all his seeming permissiveness, her husband winced when he glanced up at the photograph itself. "Never heard of him. Sounds French or something."

"Maybe you can ask your girlfriend," said Charlie to Bill. Molly turned in surprise.

"Girlfriend?"

"I haven't got a girlfriend, Mum," said Bill, looking very cross and punching Charlie on the arm. Molly winced for him when she saw him pull his hand back and rub it—Charlie's arms were quite

muscular from all of the dragon training.

"Well, if that's the case, I think one of you should ask that Rose Brown to go out some time. She's lovely, and she dropped off some papers for Arthur last week and was positively wonderful with Leo, wasn't she, Penny?" Penelope nodded, and scooped Leo up in her arms to keep him from rolling off of the table.

"Blondes aren't my type," muttered Bill.

"Well, what about you, Charlie?" she looked hopefully at her younger son. He made a face.

"Blondes aren't his type either," Bill said with more confidence. "He likes girls who have short hair and besides, 'Rose' doesn't go as well with the name 'Charlie' as—" He was cut off by Charlie grabbing onto his ponytail and pulling his head back. "Ow! Oy! Mum! Tell him to quit it!"

Well, thought Molly, looking around the room, it was loud, and busy, but she preferred the kitchen like this, with her boys fighting, Leo cooing, and Penelope humming. It had used to be like this all the time. She missed it. She watched Bill and Charlie for another moment and then turned to her husband.

"I suppose you're right," she said, feeling suddenly quite tired. "But honestly, can't you *do* anything? Poor Ginny's reputation—I mean, I'll have a word with her and make sure she understands about... things."

Arthur squeezed her shoulder and Molly looked sideways at him, shocked to notice just how little hair was left on his head. What was there was a muted rust color—a far cry from the brilliant red that had caused her to thrill when she caught a glimpse of it coming through the portrait hole at Hogwarts. That all seemed so very long ago. Most of the time, when she looked at her husband, she saw him as he had been—a tall, lanky boy in faded robes, with a laugh that she could pick out from the opposite end of the Great Hall. They were so very fortunate, she thought—they hadn't had to worry about photographers and magazines, and terrible, special potions as they'd made use of dark corridors and abandoned classrooms. Her heart suddenly ached for her daughter. She sighed and put her head on Arthur's shoulder.

"Sirius will have a talk with Harry, I'm sure," he said. When Sirius didn't respond, Arthur craned his neck, and Molly shifted in her seat to see Sirius rocking Leo in his arms. Penelope was drawing a crude diagram of Culparrat on a piece of parchment and mumbling as she pointed out various key boundaries.

"... so, you really think it's possible for anything to get through that level of protection?"

"It was possible for a dog to slip away from Azkaban when the Dementors were in place," Penelope reminded him. "Putting up layers and layers of common charms and enchantments won't stop anyone. We need to create something entirely new..."

"And the Thinker didn't come up with anything? No ideas?"

"No, she couldn't conceive of a spell. She agreed to look over our research, but even so, she said she couldn't promise anything. It's not easy." Penelope shook her head. "That's what I'm helping with now. Percy and I had started to do research out of desperation. I know the history—what's been *done*, but I haven't the foggiest idea what to *do*. All I'm doing right now is compiling a list of all of the past attempts at Imprisonment Charms and making sure that they really won't work at Culparrat. And so far, I've been right. They all won't work. But maybe someone will be able to make sense of all of these notes, once they're compiled."

"Hmph," was all Sirius said.

Arthur cleared his throat. "Sirius," he said again, a bit more loudly, "have a word with Harry, will you?"

"A word?" asked Sirius, looking confused. "About what?"

"About the, er, photo," said Arthur. He sounded very ministerial. "He should understand that he needs to be more, er, *discreet*."

"Discreet?" said Charlie. "He needs to keep his hands off of her, is what he needs to do!"

"Come on, Charlie," said Bill, trying to soothe his brother's growing agitation. "You heard Penny—you know it's all rubbish."

"I'll talk to him," Sirius said, shrugging. "Although I'm not sure what good it will do. They're young. They'll carry on no matter what I say."

"I'll tell you what we *can* do," said Charlie, whose face was now becoming quite red. "We can make the little runt's life a bloody living *hell* is what we can *do*. There're things you can put in a dragon's food to make them more excitable..."

"More excitable than usual?" asked Bill. He was smiling, and Molly shot him a warning look. It wasn't good to tease Charlie too much about the dragons.

"Really?" Sirius seemed much more interested in the dragons than he had in the magazine.

"Why didn't O'Malley tell me that last week? Do you think someone could have slipped Norbert something to make him act like that?"

Charlie shook his head. "No, Norbert was lethargic and his eyes were unresponsive to stimuli—he was just feeling weak. Sign of viral infection. But if you put an entire Flutterby Bush in with their food, the dragons start to *bounce* a little bit."

"Charlie!" Now that she'd calmed down, Molly was feeling fully protective of Harry once again.

"What?" he answered, somewhat defensively. "It won't *hurt* him—permanently. We use those bushes all the time when training keepers. It helps them expect the worst. And really..." he gave an angelic smile, "all the new riders should be put through the test. We didn't do it before because we were on such a strict deadline."

Sirius turned to Arthur. "Can't you forbid that somehow?"

Arthur held up his hands and removed his Ministry badge. "Sorry, mate," he answered, clapping Sirius on the back. "I only have so much power."

"It won't hurt him *much*," Charlie said, Summoning a spoon and dipping in to taste the stew in the cauldron. "His bum might be sore for a few days. And—he might be dizzy. Nothing he can't handle."

Molly decided that now was the time to change the conversation. "Charlie Weasley—you will do no such thing!" She turned to Sirius. "Now, Sirius, dear, are you staying for tea?"

"No, thank you," said Sirius, casting Charlie a dark look. "I should go home and *talk* to Harry," he said. He handed Leo back to Penelope and reached across the table for the magazine. "But I'll take this along to show to Ginny, shall I? Hear her side of the story?"

Before Molly could stop him, he was gone. She made a mental note to destroy the Howler that was written up and sitting in her bedside table. She'd just invite Ginny over to have a chat tomorrow after her lessons. With a small smile, she began to clear the papers off the table, bending down to kiss Leo on the head as she did so. Her children were grown, but at least all but one had survived the war. She thought about the Diggorys and their son. They had never even had the blessing to see him grown, and married. She barely heard the noise as Bill and Charlie continued to mock-wrestle by the fireplace, with her husband encouraging them and acting as a referee. At least they were there, and Molly suddenly felt that she was very fortunate indeed.

* * * * *

Two nights after Halloween, the sky was cool and purple. Harry and Ron had left a window partway open in the front room of the Notch, where they were relaxing together after work by playing a game of chess. Wind flicked at the fire, making light dance across their abandoned mess of dinner plates and the expressions of their chessmen.

"You *sure* that's the move you want?" The tip of Ron's index finger rested on the parapet of a white castle and he raised one eyebrow at Harry. "Don't lower your wand unless you're really *sure*..."

But Harry had been playing chess with Ron for many years, and this particular tactic was older than dirt. His day at Azkaban had been horrible in every way, but he couldn't help feeling a familiar sense of comfort as they played. It almost seemed that one of them might pull out a stack of Divination homework, or start to complain about an incomplete star chart. The memory cheered Harry, a little. "You're transparent," he said, and rested his wand hand on the table, signaling that his move was complete.

Ron's eyebrows shot up in dismay. "Oh no," he lamented, looking dismally at the board. "That one's really going to hurt." He seemed crushed for a minute, then cocked his head and raised his wand. "But maybe if I just move this bishop a bit..." he said slowly, and gestured with his wand. A white bishop slid within striking distance of Harry's king, mercilessly stabbing a knight on its way, and an arrogant smile crept across Ron's face. "Check," he said distinctly, and let out a satisfied sigh. "Brilliant bluffer," he added, tapping his head with his wand.

Harry blinked at the chessboard, certain that he could not be losing. He had been very clearly in the lead. "But—that move wasn't there a second ago."

"Sure it was." Ron grinned. "Don't beat yourself up, Harry—it's just that I'm a genius."

"Or an idiot savant," Harry muttered, studying the pieces and trying to work out an escape.

Ron snorted. "Smart enough to keep my love life out of the papers, anyway," he said, but his grin faded when Harry looked up. "Joking," Ron said quickly, putting up his hands in apology. "Joking."

Harry nodded curt forgiveness and looked at the board again. He had no desire to talk about the tabloid that Ron had brought home and reluctantly showed him—*Charmed Life*, it had read across the cover. *Bringing you the intimate lives, loves, and leisures of the rich and famous since 1893.* Ron

kept trying to make light of it, but Harry couldn't laugh. It wasn't funny. Every time his brain so much as touched on the subject, he cringed. He and Ginny—making no secret of themselves. The wizarding photograph moved *far* too realistically; Harry had gasped at the sight of it and had banished it out of Ron's hand and into his own room, feeling himself plunged back in time. Whoever had taken that picture could have been Rita Skeeter's partner, although what Flummy had written for *Charmed Life* was worse than those old *Witch Weekly* articles about Hermione—far worse. Those had been lies. They had been embarrassing, of course, but Harry had known all along that there was no substance to any of the accusations, and that fact had made them bearable.

But Ginny was real. Real things didn't deserve to get splayed across tabloids. Harry couldn't believe that the wizarding world demanded access to his private life simply because he was famous—he couldn't believe they even *wanted* his intimate information. He had never quite grown into the idea of being a celebrity, and it still shocked him that anyone cared what he did all day long. But they did—they cared about all of it; that article had detailed what he had eaten, what he had been wearing, and obviously whom he had been kissing, as if he weren't a person at all, but some sort of entertaining push-button display. His only consolation was that he hadn't been touching Ginny anywhere indecent; his photo-image hands had stayed firmly planted on her waist—or at least, he thought they had. But even that didn't give him much comfort—every time Harry imagined Mr. and Mrs. Weasley looking at that picture, he felt a little bit sicker.

Worst of all, he couldn't even go and talk to Ginny about it. He had tried to go to Lupin Lodge, but Remus had caught him at the door and turned him kindly—but firmly—away, with the promise of news later on in the evening. Harry didn't want to wait—he wanted to see Ginny's face and hear her voice and know what she thought of everything. He knew that he could stick his head in the fire, but he didn't want to do it with Ron watching. It was the first time in his life he'd wished for five minutes at the Dursleys' house, with access to the telephone.

Avoiding his thoughts as best as he could, Harry pointed his wand at his king and concentrated.

"Hullo—we've got an owl." Ron sprang to his feet and went to the window; Pig tumbled through it like a tiny, feathered cannonball and Ron caught him in both hands. "Stupid git," he said. "Haven't worked out how to fly properly after all this time? It's for you, Harry."

Harry looked up from the chessboard to see Ron untying a pretty-looking, white bit of parchment from Pig's leg. "Me?" he said stupidly.

"Yeah—no return address... but it's Ginny's handwriting." Ron looked at him. "Writing letters now, are you?"

Reddening, Harry held his hand out. "Here."

But Ron didn't seem inclined to give it over; he turned the letter over in his hands a few times, smirking just a little bit. "It's not very long..." he mused. "That could be either very bad or very good—"

"Hand it over."

"Why? Going to run to your room and read it?" Ron asked, and Harry shifted uncomfortably. He had never been teased about anything like this before, and he wasn't quite sure how to deflect Ron's remarks.

"No," he said, flustered.

"Here you are, then." As formally as if he were a butler, Ron handed the letter to Harry, and took his seat once more. He hunched over the chessboard with his elbows on his knees and his hands dangling forward, making the space between them very small.

Harry bowed his head in order to let Ron see as little of his face as possible. His glasses slipped down his nose but he pushed them up as well as he could and slid his finger under the envelope's closure, snapping the wax seal. He wasn't sure if he imagined it, but he thought he caught a whiff of the sweet, pine sort of scent that Ginny always seemed to have around her. Was she putting perfume on her stuff? Did everything she had just smell like that?

"Interesting envelope?" Ron asked innocently.

"Go and make tea, would you?" Harry snapped. "Be useful or something."

"In a minute." But Ron obviously had no intention of going anywhere.

Ignoring him, Harry pulled the white paper, folded in quarters, out of the envelope, and unfolded it in his fingers, not sure what to expect. He didn't have any letters from Ginny. They had never written to each other. He noticed right away that her handwriting was just like her—pretty and simple, and just a bit rumpled. A smile tugged at half his mouth and, forgetting that Ron watched him, Harry focused on Ginny's words.

Dear Harry,

After you left the Halloween party, I had a thought (Remus would be so proud). Tell me

what you think of this—if my abilities really are a sort of obstacle to us being in the same room together, why not send letters instead, until I can learn how to control myself a bit better?

Right. I'm sorry to tell you that you missed an excellent Quidditch match. First, Ron released the Snitch (also known as a letter from Hermione, which had fallen from his pocket), and I caught it. Then George, displaying excellent Beating skills, kept Ron away while I read the letter in a very loud voice. I won't frighten you with the details, because Hermione is your good friend. At any rate, I promise that I will never start a letter with "I get into bed at night..."

We gave the letter back, but it serves Ron right for being such a prat. I put up with him because he's my brother—I'm not sure why you do. I reckon he's annoying you even now, and if he is, then you have my permission as his relative to smack him around a bit.

I am doing homework as usual, and I have to go. I don't want to turn it in late; I'm in enough trouble with Professor Lupin, as it is. But I'd like to hear more about your day with the dragons, if you feel like sending Hedwig my way this evening. Was Norbert all right? Are you?

If you send a note tonight, I will read it "when I get into bed". (I never said I wouldn't end a letter that way).

Love,

Ginny

p.s. About that article. I never wanted to be in the news, but now that I am, you'll have to teach me how to sign autographs properly. Just teasing. I hope you aren't being bothered about it, over there. No one here has dared to bother me. Goodnight.

Harry got to the end of the page and started the letter over again at once, his heart beating fast. He couldn't believe how nice it was to have a note like this in his hands. It was the perfect solution for now—nowhere near as good as touching her, but there was something permanent about the letter that Harry liked. He could keep this. He could take it with him to Azkaban, and read it until he knew it.

He finished reading it again and started over for the third time.

"Good letter?" Ron asked pointedly.

Harry jumped, hastily folded the paper, and blushed. "No. That is—yes. It's nothing."

"I'll just *bet* it's nothing." Ron got up, not meeting Harry's eyes. He looked as if he wasn't quite comfortable with any further teasing. "I'll fix that tea now," he said, and left the room.

Harry slumped in relief, and opened the letter again the second Ron was safely in the kitchen. Ginny's writing, Ginny's paper—the most he was going to have of Ginny for awhile. He suddenly felt terrible for Ron and Hermione, and wondered why he'd never thought, before, about how hard it must have been for them since September, just writing letters back and forth. Ginny was just up the road and that was bad enough; he wasn't sure he could handle her being halfway around the world, even if they might as well have been that far apart.

He read the letter again, and found himself composing an answer in his head as he went along, though he wasn't sure he'd ever get himself to write it down on paper. He wondered if he ought to answer—would she expect him to? Would she even want him to? Harry wondered if what he wanted to say would come across, in a letter, and he realized that he had no idea what he should *really* say. He thought, for a moment, of asking Ron for help, but knowing he'd be met by a wide, freckled smirk stopped him from proceeding towards the kitchen.

There *was* one person he could ask for advice—Harry found himself getting up and heading quickly to his room; he shut himself in, lit the room, and went to his desk, where he removed a quill and parchment and sat down—then leapt up again with a muffled yell. The copy of *Charmed Life*, which he had Banished earlier, now stared up at him from his desk.

He and Ginny were kissing. It was only a photograph, but as he stared down at it, Harry felt terrific pressure in his blood. He watched, against his will, as his mouth touched Ginny's again and again, and he found that he could not look away. He hadn't given himself a chance to really study the picture, before. It was... strange and fascinating, to watch himself kissing. Being kissed. Not entirely unpleasant.

He might have settled in his chair to study it for awhile longer, but, to his horror, his photo hand began to grope: up Ginny's waist, along the side of her torso, and around to the front of her dress robes. Harry blanched—he *knew* he had done no such thing—and in a sickening flash, he remembered that half the wizarding world had the same picture on their dinner tables. The Weasleys would have seen this. With an unnecessarily violent flick of his wand, Harry sent the whole tabloid into the waste bin, where it landed with a metallic *thud*. He picked up his quill,

shaking with anger.

"Dear Hermione"

he scrawled roughly.

"How are you? Things here are fine."

He stopped, remembering what Ginny had said about his feeling "fine." It was true that he wasn't fine at all, at the moment, but then, he wasn't about to tell Hermione that he felt like tracking down the editors of *Charmed Life* and feeding them to the Acromantula. He could practically see her getting alarmed, and decided not to elaborate.

"Halloween was good, at Hogwarts,"

he wrote.

"Wish you could have been there, Nearly Headless Nick was there and Dobby asked all about you."

Harry stopped, gathered his nerve, and kept writing.

*"Ginny wrote me a letter. Perhaps you could tell me what to say back to her.
Hope things are good with the Thinker.
Write back,
-Harry"*

He rolled up the parchment, tied it tightly shut, and stood up to give it to Hedwig, who seemed to sense her necessity. She gave her feathers an important ruffle and stared unblinkingly at Harry.

Halfway across the room, however, Harry had a panic attack. The letter was ridiculous. He wasn't going to ask Hermione anything. He pivoted, tossed the parchment in the bin, and pointed his wand at it. "*Obliterate*," he said, for good measure, and the contents of the bin went up in a flash of fire, making Hedwig hoot indignantly. He didn't need Hermione's help, or Ron's permission. If the whole world could watch him kiss Ginny in the papers, then he could damn well write her a tiny little note.

The only question was what to *say*... Harry returned to his desk, thumped into his seat, and sat hunched over a new piece of parchment with his fingers in his hair, scratching his head and making his hair stick up even more than usual.

"Dear Ginny,"

he finally wrote, when he had pulled himself together enough to pick up his quill,

"Thanks for the letter. I'm sorry about the picture. I came over earlier to see you, but Remus stopped me from coming up."

He read over that bit several times and was finally satisfied with it, though he was baffled about what to write next. Everything he wanted to say sounded so stupid in his head that he knew he'd never get it right on paper. Frustrated, he pulled Ginny's letter open again and smoothed it out on the desk beside his nearly empty page. Perhaps he could take his cues from her.

"I'm glad we talked the other night,"

he wrote slowly.

"I miss you."

Harry clenched his fingers a little. He couldn't leave that. That sentence had to go. He put down the quill and fumbled for his wand to do an Erasing Charm, but before he got his hand to it there was a rap at the door.

"I'll have tea in a minute," he called hastily, not wanting to explain to Ron that he was writing back to Ginny. "Just putting something away."

"There's no rush," someone called back—but it wasn't Ron.

Harry looked over his shoulder and stared at his bedroom door. That had been Sirius's voice. Sirius was out there, in the hallway. Harry couldn't remember if Sirius had ever been over to the Notch before, and though part of him was immediately irritated that Sirius had taken his time about it, another part of him was instantly glad to hear his godfather's voice. He wasn't sure which side of himself to agree with.

"I'll just bother Ron till you have a minute," Sirius said, "all right?"

Harry sat still, wishing he didn't have to say anything back—but now that he had already answered he couldn't pretend to be asleep. Unable to

think of another good excuse not to come out, he was finally forced to reply. "Fine," he said shortly.

He waited until he heard Sirius step away from the door and walk back out to the front of the house, then turned determinedly back to his letter. He had to reply to Ginny before doing anything else.

"You must be all right, if you ended up playing Seeker—too bad you couldn't keep what you caught,"

he wrote, right beside *"I miss you."*

He supposed that part could stay. It wasn't so bad. It was true, anyway. He tapped the quill on his desk and wracked his brain for something else. Again, he scanned Ginny's letter for help. *"As for dragons, Norbert did all right when I was out at Azkaban,"* he put, after a minute.

*"He was sick the other day, but he's been fine since then. It was probably just the rain. Sirius just dropped by, so I need to go. But I'm glad you wrote. Write back soon.
Love,
Harry."*

He stared at his signature for a long time, not certain if he ought to be so obvious. Ginny had written "Love" before her name, but then, some people always did, and perhaps she was one of them. Hermione had signed her letters "Love from" for seven years, and Harry had never thought twice about that. Now, however, the word glared up at him in his own handwriting, and he felt quite naked. He wondered if Ginny would know what he meant. He wondered if he'd written too much.

A burst of raucous laughter from the kitchen interrupted Harry's train of thought; he tried to concentrate further but couldn't. He folded his letter and tightly sealed it, and before he could second-guess himself, Hedwig stood on the edge of his desk, holding out her foot and looking as though she wouldn't take to it very well if he cheated her out of another opportunity. Harry attached the letter to her leg and fondly stroked her wing, then watched her fly off through the darkness towards Lupin Lodge. When she had disappeared from view, he got up from his desk and went towards the kitchen.

Ron and Sirius were in the middle of a whispered conversation now, and Harry strained to hear what he could.

"...no idea?" Ron asked.

"Mick O'Malley seems to think that the rain was responsible—that Norbert was sick and his energy was low."

"And that's why the Dementors got so close?"

"In theory."

Ron gave a low, angry laugh. "I don't believe it."

"Why not?" Sirius sounded intrigued. Harry was, too; he stopped outside the door of the kitchen and listened.

"It was Malfoy," Ron said quietly. "I know it."

"But it wasn't," Sirius said. "I told you what I saw. Malfoy brought his dragon in to drive the Dementors back. It surprised the hell out of me, but it's the truth."

"It was *him*," Ron insisted. "He's up there working, isn't he? And why? Everyone knows he doesn't have to—my dad told me the Malfoy fortune was heavily fined over the summer, but it's still a fortune—and Malfoy's never done a lick of work in his life before this. He could've been playing Quidditch—"

"So could Harry," Sirius pointed out.

"But Malfoy's not up there riding dragons for the same reasons Harry is. Harry took the job because he feels responsible. Malfoy's just up there to cause problems, the way he's been causing problems ever since we've known him. Don't you wonder why he dropped the charges against me?"

I do—I wonder if he's concentrating his efforts on Harry, trying to do as much damage as he can. Best he'd've got out of a trial is a couple of months in jail for me, or maybe a fine. But up there at Azkaban, he could—he could push Harry off or—I don't know—I don't know what he's up to, I just know he's up to it. "Ron stopped his rant, breathing heavily.

"It's... not that I haven't suspected him," Sirius said, after a pause. "Everyone's got an eye on him, your brother included. But Ron, he hasn't done anything except... help."

"It's true," Harry said suddenly, stepping into the doorway. The kitchen of the Notch was functional but quite tiny; Ron and Sirius filled it to capacity and Harry was forced to stand just outside the door.

Ron leaned against the stove and looked warily at him. "How long were you listening?"

Harry shrugged and looked at Sirius, who stood against the wall between the waste bin and the counter, the top of his head touching the bottom of the clock.

"Harry." Sirius grinned. "Done writing?"

Harry nodded, but offered no further information, and after awhile, Sirius's grin looked rather awkward, stretching hopefully in the silence.

"Did you need something?" Harry finally asked. He knew it was abrupt—even rude—but he stood with his arms folded and waited for Sirius to answer.

Sirius did answer, eventually, stepping away from the wall and gesturing to the door. "No, not really. Just stopped by. Thought we might have a walk—it's a nice night, if you're not too busy."

Now it was Harry who felt awkward. He could feel Ron's eyes on him. He thought about saying no to Sirius—he could say that he was tired, or not feeling up to it—he could say that he and Ron hadn't finished their chess match. Those things were all true. But for some reason, he couldn't bring himself to say them. "Okay," he agreed, and backed out of the doorway. Ignoring the look of happy surprise on Sirius's face, he went to the hook by the door and grabbed his cloak. "Mind if we go now? It's late."

"That's fine." Sirius followed him out into the road and shut the door. The sudden quiet was overwhelming and Harry didn't know what to say; he walked along, slightly faster than usual, and waited for Sirius to start.

It had grown quite dark. Owls hooted from several of the small cottages that lined the street, and Harry could see candlelight in many of the windows. On the roof of one house, a woman in a fuchsia cloak sat with one leg hooked around the chimney, peering through a handheld telescope. She waved down at them, and Harry and Sirius waved back.

"There are Muggles around here," Harry said, very quietly. "I wonder what they think of her."

"I'm sure they find her very eccentric," Sirius replied. "That's what we're generally called, when we act like that in public. Eccentric."

They walked along in silence for awhile, and Harry listened to his shoes crunch against the tiny rocks that fell across the cobblestones. It was a very clear night, and Harry had studied the stars for so long that he found himself doing it as they walked, naming the constellations in his head and smiling a little when he remembered how Professor Trelawney had turned nearly every one of them into a death omen.

"You seem to be all right about the tabloids," Sirius said suddenly. His voice was loud and unexpected in the silence, and Harry jumped.

"Tab—? Oh. Right." He kept his eyes on the stars. "Well, it's nothing new."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

Sirius nodded. "Ginny's handling it well, too."

That got Harry's attention; he looked sideways at Sirius before returning his eyes to the sky. "What'd she say?" he asked casually.

Sirius laughed. "Well, she didn't say anything when I first handed it to her. I thought she might burst into tears. Then she burnt the whole paper to a crisp and announced that if anyone had anything to say about it, she'd do the same to them."

Harry grinned and forgot himself, picturing it in his head. "She's great," he sighed.

"Yes, she is."

Harry flushed, realizing that he had spoken aloud. He cleared his throat. "So, er—you and Ron were talking about Norbert," he said quickly. "He was fine today, in case you were wondering. He was just sick from the rain, before."

"Good." Sirius pointed down a small path that led away from the main road and toward the woods, and he and Harry ventured down it. "Of course, Ron seems convinced that Draco Malfoy had something to do with it—"

"Ron's always blamed Malfoy for everything," Harry interrupted. "Not that he doesn't have reasons, but—you know."

"I know." Sirius snickered. "I was like that about Snape. Right after we got out of school, when the Dark army was first rising—everything that happened, no matter how cataclysmic, I was convinced it could be traced back to Snape. Your dad used to humor me, though Remus never did."

Harry kicked a stone out of the way as they approached the forested area and came to the path that wound along the outside of the woods, behind all of their houses. They hadn't walked far; from here, Harry could see the jack-o-lanterns that he and Ron had scattered around the back yard of the Notch, glowing like tiny pinpricks in the darkness. He hoped that Sirius would keep talking about his father. Harry felt strangely as if all the tension between himself and his godfather had disappeared into the darkness, leaving them room to talk.

"Speaking of Remus..." Sirius looked both ways along the path. "Which way?" he asked.

"Home," said Harry. "Have to get up early."

Sirius nodded, and they began to walk up the gently sloping path along the woods, towards the jack-o-lantern lights.

"What about Remus?" Harry asked, after a moment.

"Oh." Sirius smiled, but Harry got the feeling he was nervous. "Well, he suggested... Look, Harry, don't feel you have to say yes, but I thought he had a point, and it might be... interesting. I wouldn't mind giving it a try. Though it *has* been awhile, and I'm sure I'm a bit rusty."

Harry glanced at him. "What?"

Sirius took a deep breath. "After we left Hogwarts," he said, "your mum and dad spent a lot of time together, being in love and all that. And the five of us—that's including Peter—spent a lot of time together, either working on the war effort, or trying to forget about it. But there wasn't much time for Black and Potter, if you know what I mean."

Harry did. He had lately felt the same way about his friendship with Ron, for even though they lived in the same house, they spent little time together. "And?" he said.

"Well... every few weekends, or so, James and I would simply... disappear." Sirius smiled again, and this time, the effect was dazzling. He looked younger, and desperately mischievous, as if he had already put some terrible plan into action.

"Where would you go?" Harry asked. He slowed his footsteps, wanting to hear the whole story before they made it home.

Sirius shook his head. "That was always a secret from everyone—even Remus and your mother. We'd get back and pretend we had never been gone. If anyone interrogated us, we'd simply say that something had come up."

"Is it still a secret?" Harry asked, hoping that it wasn't.

Sirius looked at him. "Well, from Remus it is. And it would have to be a secret from Ron and Hermione—Ginny, too."

Harry considered these conditions, then nodded. "Fine."

"Where to begin?" Sirius rubbed his hands together. "First of all, we never went to the same place twice. There was the time we entered Padfoot in a dog show—"

"A *Muggle* dog show?" Harry interrupted, shocked.

"Right." Sirius cackled. "We won, too. You should've seen the looks on the judges' faces when I did an Irish jig and knew advanced mathematics."

"But that's illegal—" Harry began.

Sirius ignored him. "Another time, we went to one of those enormous old country houses—the kind they claim are haunted, then charge a fortune to tour. We took the invisibility cloak, and haunted it properly for the first time in its existence. The people on the tour got their money's worth, I'll tell you that."

"Hermione'd turn you in," Harry muttered, but he was smiling.

"We didn't always wreak havoc, though," Sirius continued, looking as though he'd been sent back in time. Harry watched his face as they kept walking, and his eyes seemed to see something in front of him that wasn't there. "We were out to have a good time together, just the two of us. We knew how to have fun better than anyone on the planet, I'm telling you. Have you ever heard of Disney World?"

"Sure," said Harry. "The one in America?"

"That's the one. Great place. So's the Bermuda Triangle. Same thing for Mount Everest—I should tell you how we got a whole hiking party to think they'd found a Yeti. We—but no—the best was running from the bulls—"

Harry stopped walking. "You and my dad did *all* that," he said flatly.

"Sure." Sirius stopped, too. "We had money, and magic, and things weren't too bad in the world yet." He sighed. "When we joined the Order of the Phoenix, and began to fight against the Death Eaters in earnest, our lives were no longer our own. You know what that's like."

Harry gave a half-shrug, and nodded.

"We knew it was coming. Everyone did—it was the same for us as it was for you. James and I wanted to do everything we could possibly do together before we lost all our time. Black and Potter." Sirius ran a hand through his hair and gave Harry an apologetic look. "You might not want to hear about him—I don't know how you feel about it."

"It's all right," Harry said slowly. "I want to hear. But why did you say that Remus had suggested something? I thought he didn't know."

"Oh, he doesn't." Sirius snorted. "Remus would hand-deliver me to the Ministry of Magic if he knew about half of what I'd done. He just remembers that your dad and I used to go off on our own every so often, and he thought that perhaps..."

Sirius went quiet, and Harry felt a little thrill. "Perhaps what?" he demanded.

"Well..." Sirius shoved his hands in the pockets of his robes and started walking again, so quickly that Harry had to hurry to catch up to him. "Well, you'll think it's daft, but I thought perhaps you and I could sort of—pick up where James and I left off. That way it could still be Black and Potter," Sirius added in a mutter, sounding almost embarrassed.

Harry didn't answer. His mind raced along with his feet as he and Sirius approached the back garden of the Notch. His father and Sirius had used to go adventuring, and now it was his turn... if he wanted it. "Where did you leave off, exactly?" he asked.

Sirius glanced at him. "It was James's turn," he said. "We took turns planning where to go next, and what to do. Running from the bulls—that was my idea. But that's the last thing we did before—and we'd always planned to start it up again after—but there was never a chance." He looked away. "Don't feel you have to, Harry," he said. "It was just an idea—"

"Then it's my turn," Harry cut in. "Is that it? I'd have to—come up with something?"

Sirius slowed his pace. "Yes," he said faintly. "If you wanted to."

"What sort of thing? Does it have to be illegal?"

Sirius choked out a laugh. "Not technically," he managed. "Although it helps. It can be anything you think we'd enjoy. Anything at all. We've got—well, we've got money, and magic, and... time. We've got all the time in the world."

"Not with the dragon schedules," Harry muttered. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that they were passing the Notch, but he kept walking. He wanted to think of something that he and Sirius could do together, and he was drawing a complete blank.

Sirius made a noise of disgust. "What we *ought* to do is go up there and obliterate a couple of Dementors. I know I'd enjoy *that*."

"Me too," Harry said quietly, and Sirius looked narrowly at him. "Look," Harry said, before Sirius could start lecturing him to quit his job and leave it to somebody else, "I want to do this. How soon do I have to think of something?"

Sirius's face cleared as if a storm had passed safely over it; his eyes lit up and he grinned. "As soon as you want," he answered. "Take your time—though perhaps a hint from your dad would help."

Harry's heart clapped against his ribs. "From—my dad?" he repeated.

Sirius nodded and the moon glinted off his dark hair. "Whenever we were stuck for ideas, we'd do what he called Retaliation Operations—James would hate me for telling you this, by the way." Sirius smirked, and looked not at all sorry. "When you were a baby, I used to warn him that one day, after you'd grown up thinking him perfect—because he always did a remarkable job of appearing to be perfect—I'd expose all his dirty secrets and tell you what he was *really* like."

"What was he really like?" Harry asked at once, nearly tripping over a fallen branch in his eagerness. This was the information he'd wanted from Sirius, ever since they'd met.

"He was—" Sirius cleared his throat and looked around, almost as if Harry's dad were about to appear from the bushes "—a miscreant, Harry. Worse than I was, by far. Oh, he was brave, of course, and clever—and fairly conscientious about the important things, like remembering your mum's birthday and fighting Voldemort—"

It was Harry's turn to snort. "Like those two things are on the same level."

"Oh they are, Harry. They are. Remind me to tell you how scary your mother could be, if one of us crossed her." Sirius gave a shudder, which was obviously false; but it made Harry laugh anyway.

"Okay—then what were the, er—Retaliation Operations?"

"Exactly what they sound like," Sirius answered, and stopped walking.

They had reached the bit of forest that lay just beyond the back garden of Lupin Lodge, and they both lingered at the edge of the property. Sirius made no move to go in. Harry was also unwilling to leave, no matter what time he had to get up and go to Azkaban. "Did you go after Snape, or what?" he asked, wondering if Snape had plagued his dad, after Hogwarts, in the way that Draco Malfoy was plaguing him.

"Never Snape." Sirius narrowed his eyes. "Wanted to. Couldn't."

"Why not?"

"Too dangerous, by that time. Snape was very deeply one of *them*, and the world had become... well. I hardly have to describe it to you."

Harry laughed softly, through his nose. "No, you don't."

"So we just went after the pettier criminals," Sirius said, looking misty again, as if he were seeing things that had happened long ago. A slow smile crept across his face, and for a second he looked entirely satisfied. "We exacted smaller justices."

"Like?"

"Like..." Sirius put his hand on the back gate, and leaned. "You know your Aunt Petunia, obviously."

Harry felt a thrill of wicked joy. "What'd you do to her?" he demanded.

Sirius gave a happy sigh. "Ah, Harry. What *didn't* we do to her? James had wanted to string her up in a dungeon for years, but Lily'd never let him do it. Protective of her sister, you see."

"And what did her sister ever do for her?" Harry asked darkly. He still couldn't quite think of his mother and his aunt as sisters. Even though he had only had the privilege of his mother's company for one, horrible instant, he knew in his bones that she had been good, and honest, and beautiful in the important ways. Not at all like Aunt Petunia. "My mum was too nice."

"Precisely what your father and I thought." Sirius nodded his approval. "But there was no budging your mum. 'James, don't you dare! She hates me enough already!'" Sirius said in a high voice. "And your dad listened to her. Until one day... It was just after your mum and dad's wedding. Lily had invited Petunia to the ceremony, of course, and Petunia had declined—harshly. She had written a letter to your mother, which detailed, in no uncertain terms, her reasons for not attending." Sirius made a noise of contempt. "She said some of the most cruel—I won't repeat them."

"Believe me," said Harry, with a tiny sigh, "I've heard them."

Sirius looked piercingly at Harry, and seemed to be arrested by what he saw. "It really is intense, you know," he murmured after awhile. "The way your eyes match hers. And it's not just the color, either—it's a look you both get."

He continued to stare, and Harry stood unblinking, not sure why his chest was so tight and his eyes stung so badly. "What happened after the letter?" he asked, carefully controlling his voice.

Sirius jumped. "Right. Sorry. After Lily got the letter, she cried like a baby. It was two days before the wedding, and we all heard her sobbing. She locked her door and told us she'd get over it, and she probably did. But James didn't. And about two weeks after they got back from their honeymoon, your dad came to me and said he'd decided to go against your mum's wishes and pay a little visit to Petunia."

"Good," said Harry, feeling for the thousandth time that he would have liked his father very much. "What happened?"

"Well, what happened is something you'll probably never forgive me for, come to think of it," Sirius said, and scratched his head. "We slipped a bit of something into that lovely woman's milk bottles, one fine morning. Something for her *and* that overgrown arse she had called a—what was it? A proper, normal, hardworking husband with a real job and a personality that wouldn't embarrass the family in public? Does that sound like your uncle?"

Harry laughed out loud. "No, but it sounds like my aunt. Why wouldn't I forgive you for that?"

"Wait." Sirius wagged his eyebrows, and continued. "That night, your aunt and uncle were anything *but* normal, proper, hardworking, and publicly acceptable. We know, because we followed them. They'd planned a night out at the opera—Die Fledermause, I think, or something else that sounded pretentious enough to make them happy, but which I'm sure they didn't understand."

Harry laughed again, and leaned against the gate beside Sirius. "Right."

"I don't remember, because I wasn't watching the opera. The real performance was in the second balcony, center." Sirius snickered. "The potion worked right on schedule. Your proper aunt and uncle leaped from their seats in the middle of the performance and started shouting about pink elephants—which they were seeing all around them, of course. Perfectly natural thing to see."

"Perfectly," Harry agreed, wishing he'd done something like that, rather than just blowing up his Aunt Marge and getting himself into trouble. "Did they stop the performance?"

"They did—and better yet, they were carted off by a couple of Bobbies—"

"They *weren't* arrested—" Harry began, but Sirius's grin was enough to convince him, and he began to laugh so hard that he nearly choked. "I never knew that!" he finally gasped. "I wish I could've seen that."

"In a way, you have," Sirius said, and apologetically quirked one side of his mouth. "You see, we have every reason to believe that your charming cousin Dudley was conceived that evening. In any case, nine months later, he was in the world, and I do apologize for that, Harry. I do."

Harry stopped laughing. "That evening?" he asked slowly. "Do you mean... in jail?"

"Well, either there or in the police car—we were never really sure. We left just after the arrest—I wanted to stay, at the time, but later I was dead glad I'd gone with James. That's a sight I might never have recovered from."

Harry winced, and put the image as far out of his mind as it would go. "Thanks for bringing it up," he muttered.

"What? You're not glad to know the dirty truth?" Sirius lightly punched Harry's arm. "Admit you knew it, somewhere deep. Dudley's a prison baby."

Harry couldn't help it; he sniggered. "It does make sense," he conceded. "Okay—Retaliation Operation. I'll think about it." He paused, and the answer came to him. "There's always Malfoy."

But to Harry's surprise, Sirius shook his head. "Don't. Not just now. Not while you have to work with him."

His first instinct was to retort that he could handle anything Malfoy threw at him, but Harry realized very quickly that he agreed with Sirius. He didn't want to make life

worse for himself, on purpose. He nodded. "All right. I'll think of someone else."

Sirius seemed surprised that Harry had agreed so easily, but he said nothing. The two of them stood there in the quiet darkness, strangely comfortable with each other now that the ice had been broken—or at least, Harry thought it had. Something had changed, somehow.

"You probably need to be in bed," Sirius said eventually. "Sorry to keep you out so late—"

"No, it's okay." Harry turned to the gate and peered across the garden at Lupin Lodge, trying to see the side of the house. If Ginny's light was on, he told himself, then he would go up to the house and see if he could get her attention. He just wanted to look at her for a minute. Maybe talk a bit. He suddenly felt like talking all night—something he hadn't felt like doing in... Harry frowned. Had he ever felt like this?

To his disappointment, her light was off. But he couldn't leave. He had spent several minutes, silently deciding how to proceed, when Sirius's voice jerked him out of his hesitation.

"Higher up," Sirius said quietly, and pointed to the roof. "Goodnight, Harry." He smiled slightly, and looked as though he wanted to say something else, but apparently thought better of it. Harry blinked and his godfather was gone; seconds later, an enormous black dog had bounded across the garden and up the steps, and then Sirius was there again, letting himself in the back door as if nothing extraordinary had happened.

When Sirius was gone, Harry followed his directions and looked up at the housetop. His gaze touched the roof's apex, and his brain froze. His heart got trapped in his throat. And though he had just felt like talking forever, now he couldn't open his mouth.

Ginny sat against the chimney, facing the back of the house, one long leg dangling down either side of the peaked roof. With her left hand, she kept a sheet of parchment pressed to her thigh so that it couldn't blow away. In her right hand, she had a little telescope. But she wasn't looking at the stars.

"Hi, Harry," she said, and her voice floated gently down and across the garden to him. "Did you have a nice walk?"

Harry still couldn't speak. She looked so pretty and relaxed—and comfortable. He wanted to climb the side of the house and lay his head down where the parchment was, and feel her fingers in his hair. It would have been so natural—not at all "eccentric". Harry thought of what Sirius had said, about what Muggles thought of people on rooftops. For a bizarre moment, he wondered what Dudley Dursley would think of a girl like Ginny Weasley, perched on top of a house. For another, even more bizarre second, Harry pitied his cousin. Dudley would never know anyone like Ginny. He wondered what sort of girlfriend Dudley *did* have. Certainly not one with red hair and white hands and eyes that seemed to know what he was going to say before he said it. Certainly not one who'd saved his life.

"Harry?" Ginny sounded concerned. "What is it?"

Harry realized that he was just staring at her, and tried to snap himself to attention. "I wrote back," he said, but his voice was nothing but a rasp. "I wrote back," he tried again, and this time it

was loud enough. He walked closer to the side of the house, so that he wouldn't have to yell.

Ginny smiled down at him. "I know," she said, and drummed her fingers against the parchment on her thigh. "I came out to study for Astronomy, since it's so clear, and Hedwig found me."

Harry felt suddenly very flustered. She had read what he had written. It was open on her leg. "I'm not—" he began, and stopped. "I never got high marks on my writing," he finished rapidly, not sure why he felt compelled to tell her. "So if—that is, I hope it isn't—"

"No, it's really nice," Ginny cut in softly, and Harry fell silent. She watched him for awhile, still smiling, then stuffed her things into the pockets of her robe and reached for her broomstick.

"Sirius told me what you said about *Charmed Life*," Harry called up, thinking he might as well get it out in the open between them. "He said you threatened them with fire."

Ginny laid the broomstick across her lap, and laughed. "Well, it's bad enough without getting teased, isn't it?" she said, and rolled her eyes. "What a picture they managed to get. Horrid. Oh—not that it *was* horrid, but—you know."

"I know," Harry assured her.

"My mum's going to have kittens." Ginny rubbed her head. "Can't wait for *that* owl. Bet it's a Howler—I'm surprised it hasn't come already."

Harry winced. "I'm so sorry."

"Why?" Ginny laughed again. "You didn't do it."

"Reporters... they... follow me around," Harry explained feebly. "I should've been watching. I mean, I *knew* they were there, and I'm sorry you have to—"

"Oh, stop." Ginny cocked her head to the side. "Harry, if people want to be stupid, let them. It doesn't matter to me," she said, and the moonlight touched her face, making her look almost ghostly. It made a strange contrast with the warmth of her voice. Using the chimney for support, she got to her feet on the spine of the roof, holding the broom in one hand.

"Careful," Harry said, putting his hands out as if to break her fall, but she was on the broom before he had any cause for alarm. She flew to the side of the house and hovered by her window, watching him. Harry walked around and stood below her.

"I wish I could come down there..." she began wistfully, looking as if she might ignore her better judgment and do it.

"Don't," Harry said firmly. He didn't think he could stand to see her face get ashen again, or to feel her go limp in his arms, even if it meant that he would get to kiss her. "Go and—write another letter." His face got hot, and he cleared his throat. "If you want to," he added faintly.

Ginny didn't seem to notice his discomfort. She flew to her window and climbed in, then leaned out and looked down at him for a long, quiet moment. Harry kept his face turned up to hers, feeling quite transfixed. There was no point in talking after all, he thought—not when a person's face said everything.

"Goodnight," she whispered, and quickly blew him a kiss. Harry shut his eyes and tried to feel it. And then her window was closed, and her blinds were shut, and she was out of view.

* * * * *

6 November

Dear Hermione,

COME HOME. I've got season tickets—season *TICKETS*, you understand—to the Chudley Cannons, and I know I've told you that before, but that *IDIOT* best mate of ours won't go with me to see the matches. It's driving me mad. So it's up to you to come back and make the most of a beautiful thing. I went with Bill to this last one—it was Monday night at seven, and Hermione, I know you don't know a Snitch from a Bludger, but even you would have loved this game, and I'll tell you why. It was an historical event. That's right, memorize it. First off, it was against Puddlemere, which means that, in terms of team histories alone, the Cannons should have been smashed flat. *SHOULD* have been.

I always knew this would happen, didn't I. Didn't I say it? Haven't I said it for years? First they beat the Bats, and now Puddlemere—and it took them three bloody wonderful days to do it. *THREE DAYS*. My voice is completely gone and Sirius does nothing but mock me, but oh, wasn't it worth every screaming second. I bought this stationery from a witch at the fan stand—isn't it fantastic? Stands out a mile. You're shaking your head, but secretly you love it and you want some, don't you? Too bad, because I didn't get you any. I got you a giant orange sparkler instead, and you *WILL* wave it about at the matches when you come back. I had to learn ruddy History of Magic whether I liked it or not, and you're going to learn to love my team. How can you not love it when it's Oliver Wood, anyway?

You know him. You should've seen him at the end of this last match—I think he's got it bad for his Seeker, Maureen Knight. She's nearly as good as Harry—and you know I wouldn't say that lightly. Every time she catches the Snitch, Oliver flings himself at her right on the field, like he's trying to snog her or something. I wouldn't be surprised. He's insane about Quidditch, as all decent people are.

Sirius is doing loads better. I don't know if it's having my help that's doing it, or if it's the fact that he and Harry are acting friendly. Harry's not well, in my opinion, but he and Ginny are speaking again and that's something. Remus is fine. He looks a lot healthier than he used to. I guess it's the lack of war, and the Wolfsbane Potion, and having Sirius around again. Sometimes, when Sirius and I work late, he gets these black circles under his eyes and he looks a bit like he did that night in the Shrieking Shack. You remember. And I find myself wondering what it was like for him, all those years. I suppose we can't know, and I'm thankful for that.

Mum wants you at our house for Christmas, and of course you're coming, but this is your official invitation. Hermione Granger, please come to the Burrow for Christmas and get your socks bored off (along with a few other things, but not by anyone but me.)

On that note, I'll stop. Sorry. I don't have time to write a really good letter at the moment, because Sirius needs me to go up to Diagon Alley with him and research Hanks Hodges, who, as you are well aware, is in for Muggle torture. I promise you that he and all the rest like him will be punished, if I have anything to say about it.

I visited your parents for you. Hope you don't mind. They look good, actually. They're being really well taken care of. They miss you.

I miss you. No words big enough. But let me put it to you this way—if I had to trade in my season tickets to have you home tomorrow, I'd actually consider making the trade.

Ha.

Love,

Ron

*

8 November

Dear Ron,

I shall answer your letter point by point.

1. A Snitch is a small, golden ball with silver wings, which flies out randomly during Quidditch games. The Seeker who catches the Snitch earns his or her team one hundred fifty points, and ends the game. A Bludger, on the other hand, is a larger, heavier, black ball, which flies about in an attempt to distract (and possibly injure) players during Quidditch games. Bludgers are generally controlled by Beaters (usually people of questionable sanity) who bat them about in a strategic (or so I am told) manner. So you see, I do know the difference between them. Let me know if you need further clarification.

2. I will enthusiastically attend Cannons matches and wave an orange sparkler about when you admit, in writing, that you secretly liked Hogwarts, a History.

3. I'm sure that Sirius is better because of all the things you mentioned: you, and Harry, and Remus, and just having a normal life again. I know I'm better for it. Not that this is really normal, but it's far better than being in hiding and having horrible nightmares every time someone disappears for an hour. I'm sure that Harry will get better too, in time. I'm glad that he and Ginny are talking. Is it strange to see them together? I've wondered for years if it would happen, but I never really knew. Harry's so hard to read, that way. I imagine it's rather funny to see him actually with a girl, even if it is Ginny. Don't tell him I said that.

I don't feel like numbering anything else. I'm so proud of you for what you're doing. I'm so happy that you feel passionate about it. I know that, with you there, no one who deserves to be in prison will go anywhere else, ever again, and that gives me a very grim sense of satisfaction. I don't necessarily like myself for feeling so satisfied, but what with my parents in St. Mungo's, I don't know how else to feel. Thank you for visiting them, Ron. You're everything to me, you know.

Of course I'll come to the Burrow for Christmas. Ask your mother if she wants help.

And yes, that means I'll be home by Christmas—but not because I'm completing my apprenticeship early. I'll never complete this. I'm not a Thinker at all. I haven't told Delia, but I'm still terribly frustrated here. Most of the time, I just want to leave. But I told myself that I'd try it until Christmas, and I will. After that, I don't know what I'll do, or who I'll

be. I suppose I'll just come home and be nothing for awhile. Perhaps I'll take a job at the Ministry after all. Or perhaps they need teachers at Hogwarts. I don't know what I am. I don't know how I'll help my parents. It's all so—

"Hermione?" Delia's deep, cool voice floated into Hermione's thoughts, and made her pause. "Breakfast hour is nearly over... You must come out now, and eat, before we begin."

Hermione turned over her letter, set her quill on top of it, and tried to quell a surge of deep frustration. She had risen at five, and meditated for an hour. It was now nearly seven, and though the best part of the day—advanced Arithmantic problem-solving, followed by the History of Magical Theory—was just ahead of her, she knew that at eleven o'clock there would be another hour of meditation before lunch, and she already dreaded it. After lunch, they would spend the afternoon in Abstract Thinking, which Hermione thought she hated more than meditation; and that would only be punctuated by light tea. An hour of meditation would come before dinner, and, after dinner, any simple spell that Hermione had managed to create during Abstract Thinking would be tested for its effectiveness.

Her simple spells very rarely made it into her letters home, however, as they were very rarely effective. Building them was simple—all theory and Arithmancy. But all the theory and calculation in the world could not make up for a faulty idea. When her concepts were unsound, her spells fell through—as eighty percent of them had done. She had never felt such a profound sense of failure.

"Hermione? Are you in there?"

It isn't Delia's fault, Hermione reminded herself, checking her tone before she answered. *She didn't ask you to come here.* "I'll eat," she called. "I'm coming now."

Breakfast was far too short and meditation, though it had become a much simpler routine, felt painfully long. Hermione's performance during Arithmancy was perfect, but listless, and though her knowledge of Magical Theory was by now quite vast, this morning she found little pleasure in discussing her reading with Delia. Delia's large, patient eyes lingered questioningly on her several times, inviting Hermione to share what bothered her, but Hermione did not take up the invitation.

It wasn't until Abstract Thinking that she finally snapped.

"But you must allow yourself to think less strictly," Delia was telling her for what felt like the millionth time. "Your meditation has trained your mind—do not roll your eyes. It will help neither of us. The meditation *has* trained your mind, though you will not trust it. You *must* trust it. Open your mind right now, just as you do in meditation. Allow that space. Close your eyes—there. Yes. And now, allow the space to tell *you* what to think, rather than the other way around. The answers will come, but not in the way that you have come to recognize answers. They may be colors. Snatches of conversation. Music. A strong urge. Listen inwardly."

They were working on the development of a human homing device. It had been requested of Delia by the M.L.E.S., who had written a report of several missing children. The children, Hermione and Delia were to understand, were the wards of the Ministry who had lost their parents in the war. St. Mungo's Children's Home had been unable to keep them from running away repeatedly, and the M.L.E.S. wanted a magical device with which to track them. Delia had read the letter, smiled, and said that it would make an excellent project for the two of them. Hermione, however, had rarely smiled since the letter had come. She felt perfectly useless as a helper, and to make matters worse, she had a feeling that Delia had solved the problem instantly, and was only waiting for Hermione to come to the conclusion on her own.

"How do we normally track people?" Delia prompted.

Hermione kept her eyes shut and gritted her teeth. "It's very simple," she managed tightly. "Magic is very well regulated, and adults' wands are registered. Spells are entirely individually traceable—"

"But children? Children who don't know magic."

"You said *normally*," Hermione answered, unable to keep the bitterness out of her voice. "I gave the normal answer."

"All right. How do we normally track *things*, then?"

Hermione took several deep breaths. *Clear your mind. Focus.* "Erm... there are small devices... there are—well, they're not magic, though. Muggles have mechanical devices... there's *Accio*...but that's a Summoning Charm..."

"What was it that you said earlier, about adults' wands?"

It was obvious that Delia already had the answer, and was only leading her towards it. Hermione knew that her teacher meant to be helpful, but she was already so aggravated that Delia's tone of voice seemed overly patient. Condescending. It was as if she were speaking to a very small child.

"Look," Hermione said, and opened her eyes. She glared at Delia. "You already know how to do

this. Don't make the Ministry wait for me to figure it out, because I never will. You know I'm not a Thinker." She tossed her head.

"Hermione—"

"No. Admit it. You know I'm not the right sort for this."

Delia folded her hands in her lap. They were sitting in the usual place: the great, wide, tiled patio, all ringed with columns. The ocean beyond them had whipped itself into frenzy; its waves were choppy and white-capped, and they smacked against the shore in a bizarre rhythm. Hermione agreed with them.

"Perhaps it would help you to know," said Delia, after a long time, "that there are certain realms of magic in which I have always been blocked."

Hermione shrugged her indifference. "The Ministry writes you with every problem they have," she retorted. "So does Hogwarts. And you've Thought of a spell for everything."

"Not quite everything." Delia's smile thinned, a little. "You arranged the Containment Charm, around the pomegranate, without my help."

"But you could've done it," Hermione pointed out. "It's not as if that was very helpful of me—it was only practice."

"No." Delia gazed at her. "I seem to be incapable of spells that relate to either captivity or death. I was perfectly useless, when it came to Voldemort. Imagine how that must have felt."

Fully surprised, Hermione stared at her teacher. "Incapable?"

"Either that, or blocked. The result is the same." Delia sighed. "A very frustrating business," she mused, and her eyes focused past Hermione, towards the sea.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said quietly. She didn't know what else to say. "That must've been awful."

"Yes." Delia was quiet for a long time, and then she spoke again. "You are highly intelligent," she said evenly. "Even wise, for your age, which is unsurprising, considering what you have been through. And you have conceived a spell—albeit simple—that was beyond my power. If you are asking me to tell you that you are incapable of this magic, then you are asking me to tell a lie."

Hermione clenched her teeth in frustration. One spell didn't make her a Thinker. Perhaps Delia was blocked—but it wasn't the same. "But I *can't* do it," she protested. "You've seen me—"

"You can," Delia interrupted. "But you take no pleasure in it. It is not natural to your mind, and your mind therefore rejects it."

"Then you admit I'm not right for it," Hermione said, unfolding her legs and standing up. She paced to the edge of the patio and leaned against one of the columns, facing the sea. The column was cold and smooth against her arm, and she leaned her temple against it, too, trying to cool her head. "Why did you let me stay here when you knew it wasn't going to work?" she demanded. She heard the sound of Delia breathing deeply, behind her. "Why didn't you send me back and wait for someone else?"

"You've asked me this before. Your real question lies deeper."

Hermione snorted. "Not really."

"No?" Delia's voice was very quiet. "Don't you want to ask me what you are supposed to be, if you are not this? Don't you wish to know what your purpose is, in life?"

Hermione had a childish urge to hit something, or sob. The sun had just slipped past the horizon, and the clouds were performing a symphony of color above the sea—purple and gold and red—as beautiful as the ceiling at Hogwarts. "I don't think I have one anymore," she finally answered, barely eking out the words without crying.

"Then you had one, once?" Delia asked softly.

"Yes. Harry and Ron and I—we-had one. We always had one."

"And did you fulfill it?"

"Yes." It was a whisper. Hermione slipped her arm around the marble column and wished that it were Ron.

"Fortunate girl." Delia sighed. "To have achieved so much, so young."

"Yes, but what *now*?" Hermione wiped the back of her hand across her eyes, and then under her nose. "I can't just get a job at a shop and pretend I'm satisfied, not after Voldemort."

"What about your friends? How are they coping?"

Hermione shrugged. "Well they're fine, aren't they? Ron's found his job, and Harry..." She trailed off. Harry hadn't found his niche at all. Harry must feel what she felt, multiplied a thousand times. "That's why he's riding the dragons..." she mumbled to herself, surprised that she hadn't thought about it that way before.

"And your friend Ginny?"

"I don't know. She always seems so... I don't know how to put it. It's like she could be happy anywhere."

"But you can't."

"No." Hermione turned around and opened her hands uselessly, as if something might fall into them. "I can't. I want to—to think, and learn, and do something—enormous. Something enormous. And don't say that I've already done something enormous, because that wasn't only mine." Hermione nearly put her hand to her mouth. She hadn't meant to say that. She hadn't even realized that she *felt* that.

Delia nodded. "So you came to be a Thinker. That would be yours."

"But it isn't." Hermione dropped her hands and her guard. Delia's face was so sympathetic. "This morning, I was writing to my—my boyfriend." The word felt funny and inadequate in her mouth. "I was writing to Ron, anyway. And the truth is, I want to go home. I know this isn't what I want to do with my life, and I miss him."

Delia smiled. "Is *he* what you want to do with your life?"

Hermione jumped in surprise. "He—well—partly, yes." Her cheeks grew warm. She had never admitted as much to anyone before, not even Ron.

"Then go home. I will be neither disappointed, nor offended."

"But I would." Hermione paced over to where Delia sat in her serene position, and dropped down to sit in front of her. "I promised myself I'd stay until Christmas, and I—well, I've only quit one other thing in my life, and it was partly because I detested the teacher. I can't quit this."

"Then stay until Christmas."

Hermione crossed her legs anxiously, and adjusted her robes over her knees. "But you know I don't care for it," she said. "You know I'd rather quit. Doesn't that—bother you? Wouldn't you rather I left, if I'm never going to use what you're teaching me?"

Delia laughed beautifully, and then she did something that surprised Hermione very much: she reached out one cool hand, and cupped Hermione's face. "Child, what I want makes very little difference, I have found, in what actually happens." She held Hermione's gaze. "The journey through life is hard enough to make without carrying the burden of so many expectations, and the ones we place upon ourselves are heaviest of all. This is one small part of your journey. Accept it as such—no more, no less. And perhaps you will use it one day, after all." She left her hand on Hermione's cheek for a moment, then withdrew it and silently stood up. "Take the rest of the afternoon to decide whether or not you would like to stay. Let me know at dinner." Delia walked into the house, and disappeared.

Hermione rocked back and forth on the tiles, her cheek tingling where Delia had touched it. Her mother had used to touch her face like that.

After a time, she quietly shut her eyes and, before she had decided to do it, her hands were open on her knees and she was meditating freely.

"We register wands..." she mumbled aloud, after several minutes had passed. "Which can be tracked because, obviously, they're enchanted..." A lovely breeze moved her hair and stirred her robes. "If the children were enchanted... but it's illegal to enchant the body of a minor... If something that they... their clothing...but they could change their clothing..."

Hermione's eyes snapped open.

"Their hair?" she whispered, to no one. "It's dead, it's not the living body. But they can't change it. If the M.L.E.S. could mark their hair..." She shook her head. "Is it that simple? It can't be that simple. Nothing important is. Is it?"

"*Yeah, that's it, we'll just love him to death, that'll work,*" Ron's voice said suddenly in the back of her mind.

Hermione had to laugh. "Or perhaps it is," she murmured. Feeling calm and strong, she stood up to go and find Delia.

Authors' Notes: Writing AtE is like jogging, as Zsenya recently discovered. The first quarter-mile was difficult and took a long time. The second quarter-mile was very easy and just flowed effortlessly. The third quarter-mile was not as strenuous as one might think, but the thrill of jogging wore off a bit. Then you stop and walk. That's where we are now. This chapter is a nice, long walk. But then! If you jog a lot (like Arabella does) then that next mile is a breeze....

Thanks to everyone for patience in waiting. Hey, we're all Harry Potter fans—what are we, if not patient?

Additional thanks to Moey, who *could* be wicked, but won't, and knew just what to do to Petunia.

The Very Late, Really Long Chapter From Hell

Fleur hadn't seen Bill Weasley since Halloween. He sat across from her now, at the low end of a big conference table in one of the Gringotts meeting rooms, taking detailed notes on a piece of parchment in front of him as Barknap, their goblin project manager, outlined the various types of charms he might expect on vaults number 687 to 712. Barknap and several of his assistants were seated on a platform at the high end of the table—a typical goblin-like attempt at appearing powerful.

There was no need for Fleur to take notes. Unless Bill or one of the goblins managed to break the charms that she had set, she was free to leave London and Gringotts at the end of the week. Not only that, but she'd also be leaving Charismatics Spellcraft International and be free to work where she wanted, not that she had a clear idea of where that was for the long term. At any rate, she couldn't leave soon enough. She had put in tireless hours reconstructing charms on the bank vaults, and in the evenings had taken to spending most of her time in the flat she had let, reading books and practicing more charms. Walking home through Diagon Alley each evening was a test of patience, as it usually happened that at least one wizard on the street would prove to be unaccustomed to seeing a quarter-veela, and would try to follow her home. Never had Fleur tried so hard to be unattractive—she was getting very little sleep, yet circles refused to appear under her eyes. She'd stopped brushing her hair for a whole week, and yet it refused to tangle. She'd never had this problem at home—but then again, at home she had often welcomed the attention.

Bill had attempted his second apology at Halloween. After talking with Professor McGonagall and Neville Longbottom at the celebration, Fleur had decided to take a walk around the grounds, to try to get a feel for what types of charms might assist in protecting the castle. No one had been able to determine exactly how Albus Dumbledore had managed to keep the school secure for so long, but Professor McGonagall had explained to her that since Voldemort was no longer a threat, it was not necessary to have the strongest charms—ones that might take years to perfect—in place before the school opened the following September. The Headmistress was more interested in restoring basic boundary charms—enough to give parents a sense of security.

Fleur was grateful that Professor McGonagall had accepted her offer of help. It had been a lucky guess that Hogwarts might be in need of assistance with charm reconstruction, and Fleur had sent a blind letter to the school in early October, searching for any opportunity to stay away from France. Her parents were upset that she wasn't returning home right away, although she'd promised to come back for Christmas. She just didn't want to go back yet. Too many things in Mont Ste. Mireille reminded her of Gabrielle. Her parents were having a difficult time of it, but at least they had each other. Fleur was very much alone.

"I'm sorry?" Bill looked up from his notes and addressed Barknap. "Look, it might help me a bit if you tell me who some of the patrons are for these vaults. If I'm expected to think like a criminal, then I'll need to know what I'm supposed to be stealing, won't I?"

"Mr. Weasley, we've discussed this before—we cannot breach Gringotts' security by telling you what's in each vault!"

The two continued to bicker back and forth for a few minutes, and Fleur held up her hand under the pretense of inspecting her nails. In truth, she was inspecting Bill instead. He wasn't handsome in a conventional sense—not handsome like her tall, dark-haired father or the Quidditch player who had accompanied her to the Yule Ball during the Triwizard Tournament. She could almost hear Clara, her school mate at Beauxbatons, sniffing something disdainful about the way his nose was a trifle too long, or how his build was a bit on the slender side. Of course, it didn't matter what Clara might have thought—Fleur had caught a glimpse of the Culparrat transfer lists while working

at Azkaban and had seen Clara's name on the list of prisoners.

Bill was... interesting looking. The arms that emerged past the rolled-up sleeves of his robes were very freckled, but his face, in comparison, was unblemished. The hair that was pulled back into that ponytail was thick and slightly wavy, and very, very red. Fleur often received envious stares and compliments on her own hair, which fell to her waist and shimmered as though enchanted, but somehow she liked Bill's better.

"Miss Delacour? Miss Delacour?" Fleur put down her hand and stopped a blush before it could start. She might not look tired, but she felt exhausted. Barknap was speaking to her. "Could you assist me up here with some of the charts?"

Rising from her seat, Fleur mounted the platform where the Goblins were sitting and, pulling out her wand, levitated the piece of parchment that Barknap had just unfurled so that Bill could read what it said.

"This is a map of the vault area that you will be inspecting," said Barknap, nodding at Fleur to point to the parchment. "There are twenty-six vaults, each protected by a different type of charm. Some are low security—standard Gringotts spells for those who can't afford more custom enhancements—and some are highly complex. There are some that you would be expected to be able to enter with little effort, however, there is not much worth stealing in those vaults, so it is of little consequence."

"I know," said Bill, "My family's vault is 687."

Fleur looked at him. He'd been writing as he spoke and she couldn't see his face, but the tips of his ears were quite pink. She'd always assumed that since his father was the Minister of Magic that his family must be quite well off.

Barknap consulted his own notes. "That is the vault of the Minister of Magic—I assure you that special charms are in place there."

Bill pushed his chair back from the table and walked up to the map. He squinted and leaned in close, so as to get a better look. Fleur took a step back, because as he neared, her heart had begun to race, just as it had done at Halloween. This only made her angry. Taking a deep breath, Fleur asked, "Do you have a problem with seeing, Mr. Weasley?"

He looked at her and shrugged. "Sometimes."

"Why are you not wearing glasses?"

He didn't answer immediately, but after a moment, muttered, "I used to—in school." He turned and walked back down to his seat.

Barknap nodded and Fleur also sat down. She was grateful, for she suddenly felt lightheaded. Bill Weasley always seemed to have that effect on her, despite her attempts to fight it.

On Halloween, she'd wandered down to the lake, feeling a need to see it again. It looked quite different from the way it had the day of the second task. Voldemort's attack on the school the year after the Triwizard Tournament had turned the banks of the Hogwarts lake into a sort of muddy wasteland. Though she'd only seen it surface once during her time at Hogwarts, the absence of the giant squid seemed to fill the lake with an emptiness that was almost overwhelming. Now, a new Mer-community was forming at the far end, and Fleur had caught a hint of their shrill voices as they'd floated to the surface, looking for building materials. She'd shivered at the sound, but had still knelt down by the water, peering in, as though trying to see to the bottom in the night. She wondered if any Grindylows had made their way into the lake. She hadn't thought that anything could be worse than thinking that Gabrielle might have died because of her own stupidity. But she'd been wrong. Nothing could fill the emptiness of not knowing what had become of her sister.

Fleur gave her head a hard, quick shake. She wouldn't cry. She'd done enough of that already. She was strong, and capable, and sure of herself. She'd just decided to ask Professor McGonagall if she could start spending her off hours from Gringotts researching Water Charms in the Hogwarts library, when she'd heard footsteps behind her.

"Fleur?"

"Oui? I mean, yes? Who is it?" she'd asked, though she'd already recognized the voice. She turned around, and could see a familiar tall figure with a pale face in front of her.

His face had broken into a half-hearted smile. "I don't know if it's such a good idea to be alone out here," he'd said.

She'd stood taller and tossed her head. "I am very good alone," she'd said, wondering if he'd catch her double-meaning. Instead, he took a step closer.

"Look," he'd said, digging into the muddy ground with his foot, "I know you're upset with me. I'm sorry that I ..." he seemed to be grasping for words, "accused you."

"I am not upset with you, Monsieur Weasley. I do not think of you," she had replied, holding her chin up high. He'd looked upset, and she was glad. At least he had believed

her lie. He was silent for a moment, and then said, *"I haven't seen you around Gringotts much."*

"No, there is quite a lot of work, and you are not the only curse breaker employed 'ere." She'd known he wasn't talking about work, but she refused to show any indication. It seemed to irritate him.

"I meant, I haven't seen you in general, except for that time in Madam Malkin's with my brother." His eyes had narrowed. *"He's got a girlfriend, by the way."*

This had made Fleur laugh until she was almost hysterical. Bill had stared at her with a mixture of confusion and worry, but she'd continued to laugh, eventually holding onto her side as she gasped for air. *"But he is just a boy!"* she'd said. *"A grown man like you, jealous of a little boy? I am sorry, it is too funny."*

The skin along his jawline had gone ruddy and the muscles in his face went tight. *"I'm just telling you that you'd better direct your charms elsewhere."*

She still shivered, thinking how cold his voice had been. She'd stopped laughing and studied him, feeling suddenly desperate, wanting a glimpse of the person she had met in the dragon trenches—the one who had made her feel so immediately safe, and had known everything about her without even having to ask. But that Bill seemed to have disappeared along with the war. Or perhaps he had only been a dream to begin with.

"You do not know me at all," she'd said quietly, and brushed past him back to the castle.

He'd hurt her feelings more than he'd ever know. But, Fleur reflected, pulling her plait from behind her back and inspecting the ends as Barknap continued to drone on, at least he'd taught her a valuable lesson. She had always wondered if she'd ever be able to have a normal relationship with a man, and now she knew the answer. Her mother had been extraordinarily lucky to find her father.

"If there are no further questions," Barknap's voice interrupted her thoughts, "you may begin working on the vaults this afternoon. Miss Delacour," he turned to address Fleur, "if the charms on these last vaults are in order, then your employment at Gringotts is finished."

Fleur heard Bill draw a sharp, soft breath. "What?"

She drew herself up straight.

"You have worked very hard here," Barknap went on, "and we thank you. Please report to the main office before you leave to turn in your badge and sign your paperwork." With as close to a smile as a goblin could muster, he nodded and wobbled out of the room, his assistants following him. Fleur waited until the door shut, then dared a glance at Bill.

He was staring at her with his mouth open.

* * * * *

"Well." Fleur lowered her wand and took a deep breath. "I believe that's finished." She put a hand on her hip and struck a very self-satisfied pose.

Bill stood behind her with his arms crossed, his eyes trained on the back of her silvery head, which managed to produce its own light even in the very dim glow of one lamp. But her hair wasn't as perfect as usual; she had it tied up tightly so it wouldn't trouble her while she worked, and fine, gently-curling wisps had escaped at the nape of her neck and at her temples. She was practically a mess; wandering around the depths of Gringotts in plain work robes and sturdy shoes, breathing hard from the exertion of difficult charm work, rolling up her sleeves just like everyone else. Even her accent was greatly diminished—the "z"s that had made her sound exotic were lately under careful control, and she had adopted a deceptively British turn of phrase. Her face was, of course, remarkable, but there was little else about her to demand Bill's total attention.

And yet she had it. He couldn't take his eyes off her. It was nearly too frustrating to bear. He wrenched his gaze to the spot she'd just enchanted and glanced over it; a nest of small corridor-openings had been visible to the naked eye, just hours before, and now the openings were nowhere to be seen. Bill raised his wand and muttered a few words to break the enchantment apart, but he was unable to destroy it—and that was a good thing, he reminded himself. Every one of her charms had been watertight, and that was the only point in having her here. He stuck his wand back in his belt.

"It's done," he agreed, and studied the wall for as long as he could. But without anything further to occupy him, he couldn't help it—his eyes strayed back to her and lingered. There was one long lock of hair that had escaped entirely—it grazed Fleur's collar and continued all the way down to the small of her back. Bill's fingers itched to put it back in place, and he sent a silent curse in her direction.

Fleur was apparently oblivious to his troubles. "What's next?" she muttered to herself, pulling a scroll out of her robes and unrolling it to reveal a very complicated map, which she tapped with her wand. "Assignment eighteen is complete," she said clearly, and touched her wand to the map, exactly where they stood. "This is my location, and I am facing south. Directions to the next task, please."

"Walk west, and turn left at the fourth corridor, which is located just past the medium-security vaults," said the thin, papery voice of the map. "Continue to the end. On the left is a curse shield, which prohibits entry to all but our goblins. It is invisible. Take heed not to touch that shield under any circumstances. On the right is a wide door in the wall, which was once a hidden entrance. Please hide the door again, allowing it to appear only to Chief of Security Magda Crustus. Thank you."

Fleur tapped the map again and put it away. Without turning around—indeed, as if she had forgot Bill's presence altogether—she walked quickly in the direction the map had indicated. In seconds, she had been swallowed by the enormous darkness of Gringotts' underground tunnels.

"*Lumos Splendidus*," Bill said quickly, and several lamps came to life in the corridor where Fleur stood. The light was so much brighter than before that both of them winced and stood still for a moment.

"Zat was unnecessary," Fleur snapped under her breath.

Bill wasn't sure why, but the sudden resurgence of her accent pleased him. "Well, you won't find the right-turn in the dark," he pointed out.

"I will light ze lamps. I 'ave told you I don't want 'elp."

He sighed. "Fine." It had been like this ever since the first day she'd arrived—since he'd somehow angered her by speaking the truth. "*Nox Totalus*." He'd tried to apologize to her at Halloween, but it hadn't worked.

The lights went out, leaving them in total blackness, and Fleur made a sound of annoyance. "*Lumos Splendidus*," she said, through obviously gritted teeth, and the lights came on again. She continued forward, much more quickly, and took a sharp left after the vaults.

Bill followed, irritated, yet glad that Gringotts had assigned him to look after the strength of Fleur's enchantments. For weeks he'd been breaking down the last of the curses in Gringotts' underbelly, and he had been unable to find any legitimate excuse to see Fleur or talk to her. And now, just as they were finally paired up together, she was leaving. He wondered if she was returning to France, or some other exotic location, and he felt a stab of jealousy. Of course, she hadn't said anything to him—it wasn't like her to actually *tell* him anything, was it? He threw a disgusted look at her back as she disappeared into darkness again, down the next hallway.

"Planning to do *these* lamps," Bill asked loudly, "or shall I—"

"*Lumos Splendidus*," Fleur interrupted haughtily, and the corridor was flooded with lamplight.

Bill bristled at her tone—it wasn't fair. She *was* part veela. She had no business getting so upset over his knowing it. Her continuing defensiveness only convinced Bill further that her charms had been responsible for his inability to control himself on that long ago night in the dragon camp. He had tried to get a further explanation out of her after their confrontation in his office—he'd even tried to apologize for the way in which he'd brought it all up—but she had barely been civil to him since her arrival. And that stunt she'd pulled in Madam Malkin's, pretending that they didn't even know each other... Bill glared silently at her, and reminded himself that Ron still deserved a punch in the mouth for being an insufferable arse.

Fleur stopped where the corridor ended and peered left, her profile curious. She leaned close to what looked to be a perfectly innocent opening in the wall, but they both knew very well that it was a curse shield—the map had been clear in its warning.

"Don't touch it," Bill said curtly, stepping closer to her. "It'll suck you to the other side, and I don't know what they've got back there, but they generally do serpents in the medium-security wards."

Ignoring him entirely, Fleur continued to study the dangerously empty space. She raised her hand towards it.

"I'm not kidding," Bill said, his voice taking on a panicked note he could not quite hide. "Get back from there." He wondered if he could grab her and successfully pull her back, but didn't try it. He feared he would startle her into tripping forward.

Fleur looked over at him. When she caught his eye, she threw back her head and, apparently for no reason at all, shot him a dazzling smile. "Worried about me?" she cooed.

Bill immediately felt sick to his stomach. "Get *back* from there," he repeated sharply—then rashly added, "And quit it with that crap, it doesn't work."

Fleur finally dropped her hand. She stepped away from the curse shield and faced him fully, her

eyes oddly bright. "What doesn't work?" she asked quietly.

Bill swallowed. She was so close. And it was a damn private spot down here, really. And when she wasn't giving him flashy looks, her face was so... sad. For a moment, he thought he actually could detect bags under her eyes. "The smiling thing," he managed.

Fleur did smile, at that, but it wasn't the same thing at all. The corners of her mouth barely turned up and her blue eyes crinkled a little. Bill's heart lurched. "It doesn't work?" she repeated. "Are you quite sure?" She gazed up at him and her expression changed entirely; she gave him another smile that showed all her teeth, and she tossed her head.

Bill winced and stepped back. Whatever repellent Charlie had put on him, it was certainly haphazard. It failed about half the time but succeeded the other half, and it was working well at the moment. "I'm sure," he answered irritably, gesturing at the door in the right hand wall and hoping she'd turn around, do her work, and leave him alone.

The brittle smile left Fleur's lips and the high-polish vanished from her eyes, which sank back into their strange, sad depths. She studied his face for a long moment. "Good," she finally said, and turned away.

Bill leaned back against the wall—he hardly had a choice; that last, long look had left him oddly weak in the knees—and watched her work. The darkness, the proximity, his position with his back against rough stone—all of it reminded him of the night in the dragon camp. He thought of Percy for a moment, going back through several memories of his brother and reliving them in his mind. He also thought of Gabrielle, though he couldn't picture her exactly. He imagined a miniature version of Fleur, and wondered if Percy had an eye on her, wherever they were. He hoped so. He was so lost in thought that, when another long strand of hair escaped from the knot at the back of Fleur's head and uncurled until it lay flat along her back, Bill moved forward, took up the strand in his fingers, and began to twist it up with all the rest.

Fleur spun at him so quickly that he nearly lost his footing. Not wanting to fall backwards into the curse, he dropped her hair and grabbed hold of her arm for balance. She stared from his face to his hand, her expression a mixture of alarm and—something else. Her breathing sped up. "What are you doing?" she demanded.

Bill got his balance and let her go at once. "Sorry," he said, lifting his hand as if to show her it was harmless. "Didn't want to fall." He jabbed his thumb at the curse shield.

"But *why* was your 'and on my 'air?" She threw back her shoulders, and her voice was as French as it had been the first time they'd met.

Bill didn't have an answer. He couldn't remember deciding to step up to her, or making the choice to touch her hair. He must have been... compelled, somehow. "Guess it works after all," he mused, hardly realizing he was talking out loud.

Fleur started. Her eyes widened slightly and, when she comprehended his meaning, she let out a very bitter laugh. "I am finished 'ere," she muttered, turning back to the door—which Bill realized was no longer a door at all, but a smooth expanse of enchanted wall—and lifting her wand again. "*Concludere*," she said crisply, then tucked her wand into her belt and went quickly past Bill. She was far away from him in seconds, rounding the corner before he could think clearly to stop her. "Go on and test it," she called back at him. "It will *not* come down."

"You'll get lost," Bill called back, snapping to attention when he realized his mistake. "Wait up." He'd just made another comment about her veela heritage without even meaning to do it. For the first time, however, and for some reason he couldn't quite place, he thought that perhaps she had a right to her indignation. He was struck by a desire to apologize, but Fleur had disappeared without bothering to answer. Ignoring the instructions emanating from his map, Bill took off down the corridor until he caught up with Fleur around the corner.

"Fleur," he said, stopping a few feet behind her. She turned, and crossed her arms, but did not speak.

"Look," Bill continued, not sure what it was exactly that he wanted to say, "Where're you going, when you leave here?"

"I will be returning... to my flat in Diagon Alley," she answered, looking a little pleased with herself.

"So, you're staying in London? You're not going back to France?"

"I am not returning to France," she answered. She looked unwilling to give any more information, although her eyes seemed to be studying him intently. But when he caught her gaze, she looked away. And suddenly, it was very, very important to Bill to know where she was headed. But he was having a difficult time saying it.

"Can't we be friends?" he asked, although, as soon as he said the words, he knew that wasn't what he wanted. "We could have dinner this evening, to celebrate your last day."

But Fleur only shook her magnificent head. "I would not want to injure you in any way, Mr. Weasley, with my excessive powers. It is better for your digestion to eat without me."

And with that, she seemed to vanish.

Bill stood rooted to the spot for a few moments, wondering how in the world she'd managed to Disapparate from the depths of the Gringotts vaults. But a moment later, he caught a glimpse of golden hair disappear around a corner at the far end of the hall. For a long while he was unable to gather his thoughts, and finally, with a frustrated *Damn!*, he turned back down the hall to the hidden door and tried to make it show itself. It remained hidden on his first attempt, but Bill wasn't satisfied with that—this time, he would truly test her. Beginning with the simplest and working up to the most dangerous, Bill used every Breaking, Fracturing, and Splitting Charm in his arsenal. He conjured every Dividing spell he knew, and called on every destructive curse that he thought he could get away with in such a small space. He would feel better if he could only find a flaw in her work—there *had* to be a flaw—and he spent nearly as long trying to obliterate the charm as Fleur had spent building it up.

Nearly an hour later, the seal was still perfect. Bill gave up, panting and cursing, and this time the curses had nothing to do with magic. He stormed back to his office in a fury and, after hastily completing the day's paperwork, blew angrily out of the bank and into Diagon Alley. The sun had just set and the sky was purple—stars were beginning to appear, though very few were visible with the city lights so near—and there was a wonderful, taut November wind rushing down the narrow wizarding street. Bill barely noticed any of it. He didn't even stop for the groceries that he, Charlie and Mick desperately needed. He usually took the necessities upon himself, but he wasn't in the mood tonight. Briefly he considered stopping into the pub and taking out his anger on a pint, but Flourish and Blotts was closer, and Bill charged into the bookshop, quite on a mission. He had put this off long enough, pretending that it didn't matter, but the situation was entirely out of hand. He had never had so little ability to manage his emotions—even his actions—she was driving him out of his mind. He found the section on magical creatures and came to a halt.

Veela ~ The Definitive Guide to the Undefinable Goddess. Bill pulled it from the shelf, read the back, and began piling other books into his arms. *Women with Wings (And Beaks and Claws, so Watch It)* went into the stack, along with *Siren or Sweetheart? A Study of the Natural Enchantress* and *How to Tell if You're Under Her Spell*. It wasn't until he reached the counter and the salesgirl behind it gave him a funny, half-smiling look that he realized how obviously his purchases revealed his problem. Bill's face burned.

"Doing research?" the girl asked tactfully, putting all his books into a bag. "Looks interesting. That's going to be ten Galleons."

Bill nodded. "Research," he agreed, thankful for the excuse. And it was true, really.

"Are you a Weasley, by any chance?" the girl asked, handing him his change. "You have the same hair as Ron Weasley. And you both clear out whole sections," she added with a grin. "He bought a copy of every single Quidditch tabloid we had, after the opening match."

"Ron's my brother—why, do you know him?" Bill asked, taking his bag.

"Oh no, not really." The girl blushed. "But I was at school with him, a year older, and I just heard of him, you know—everyone has—all those things he did with Harry Potter. And going about with Sirius Black. And being, you know, related to the Minister—like you are—that sort of thing—anyway, it was rather exciting to meet him..." The girl trailed off and blushed darker, as if suddenly sensible of having babbled.

Bill nearly gaped at her. He knew Ron had a girlfriend, knew he'd somehow invited Fleur on a date at one point, and knew, ultimately, that his brother was well and grown up. Still it was odd, seeing girls blush after him. His eyes darted to the salesgirl's name tag. Laurel. He'd have to remember to needle Ron about it later—he owed him at least that much of a jab. "Well, I hope he didn't clear you out entirely," Bill said lightly, trying to be tactful for her in return. "Though you'd better stock up—if the Cannons keep winning, then he'll definitely be back for more."

"Oh, okay," Laurel said, looking pleased at the prospect.

Bill left the shop, forgetting Ron, feeling well and truly armed. He would figure Fleur out, with or without her help, in the way he had always figured things out in school. Thorough reading, intense study—and if that failed, he'd ask a professional.

"Long day?" Mick asked with a grin, when Bill pushed his way into the flat and dumped his cloak on the hall table.

"No longer than yours, I'm sure." Bill glanced around the flat and raised his eyebrows. "It's clean in here," he pointed out. "Is everything all right?"

Mick laughed and straightened the collar of his dress robes.

Bill's jaw dropped. "You're wearing dress robes," he said.

"Charlie always said you were observant." Mick strode across the front room to a small mirror that hung above the wireless. He ran both hands through his hair, and worked a little bit on his part.

"Why... wait, who's all this for?" Bill asked, shrewdly changing the question as he realized half the answer.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Mick answered, turning around from the mirror and heading for the door. But he stopped in mid-stride and shook his head. "No no," he said to himself. "Not done, you prat." He spun round and walked out, disappearing into his bedroom.

"Try me," Bill called after him.

"Nah," Mick called back. "She's worried about her reputation."

Bill snorted. "No offense, but she can't be *too* worried, can she?"

"What, going out with me?" Mick reappeared, smelling distinctly—but not overwhelmingly—of cologne. "She's damn well worried." He grinned again. "Because she's damn well smart."

Bill was intrigued, but not enough to pursue his line of questioning; Charlie had been secretive about Cho Chang, and now Mick was being secretive about whatever tart he'd lined up for the evening. It hardly mattered to Bill, who had research to do. He sat down on the sofa and pulled the most technically informational of the books from his shopping bag.

"The definitive guide to veela—what?—Weasley, you're not honestly going to sit there and read that?" Mick asked, pointing at the spine of Bill's book.

Bill glanced warily up at him. "Why?"

"Don't tell me you spent money on it—oh, blimey, Flourish and Blotts?" Mick shook his head at the shopping bag.

Bill shot him an aggravated look. "I need it," he said shortly, and returned his attention to the table of contents.

"What for, when I know all about it?" Mick laughed. "Ask me a question about veela, and see if I can't answer better than that book."

Bill looked back up at him, shocked at his own stupidity. He had entirely forgotten that he lived with a species specialist. "What's the difference between a full-blood veela," he asked immediately, "and one that's one-quarter?"

Mick whistled low. "Huge, gaping, cavernous differences," he answered cheerfully, reaching for his cloak. He threw it on and grabbed his muffler and gloves from hooks near the door.

"How huge? What differences?"

"Can't get into it now. Got to go."

"But—"

"It's Fleur, isn't it?" Mick looked over his shoulder and gave Bill an appraising glance. "Charlie and me were wondering when it'd start getting to you. I'll tell you everything you need to know later on—read all you like, but I wouldn't waste my time. There's a game on in an hour, listen to that and forget the books."

"You're willing enough to miss the game," Bill grumbled. He had an opportunity to get some straight answers, and he hated waiting.

"Yeah, I'm willing," Mick said, opening the door and letting in a blast of cold air. "But I don't have to miss it. We're trading off. I take her out, and then she takes me in." He gave Bill a wicked look. "Come to think of it, I bet I *do* miss the game." He pulled the door shut against the wind with a slam, and was gone.

* * * * *

Remus absently drummed his fingers on the arm of his late father's favorite chair, watching Ginny brew the Wolfsbane Potion in the study fireplace. Her hair was snapped tightly into a barrette at the back of her neck, and her sleeves had been pushed up past her elbows. She hummed to herself as she stirred, but Remus only half-listened to the tune. The *Daily Prophet* lay abandoned in his lap; he was now thinking about tonight, and the sort of transformation it would be. Simple. Gentle. Remus wasn't sure if he was imagining it, but Ginny seemed to make the potion better than anyone ever had. It was more than effective—it almost seemed to put him in good spirits, while the wolf inhabited his body, and he had been waking up much less exhausted after full moons. He even thought that his hair looked a little browner than usual. He certainly *felt* younger.

Sirius had looked younger, too, ever since Ron had begun to give the Ministry his full attention. Perhaps the Weasley presence had natural restorative effects, Remus reflected with a smile, listening to Sirius and Ron discuss law in the front room. Or perhaps it was the fact that Sirius had successfully spoken with Harry; he had come home from their walk with incredible energy, and his

happiness on that subject had now lasted for nearly two weeks.

But most likely, Remus thought, it was simply becoming obvious to all of them that life was beginning again. Voldemort wasn't coming back, and though the injuries he had left were far from healed, Remus had high hopes that none of them would see another Dark Lord in their lifetime. His mind unmercifully suggested that if evil like Grindelwald and Voldemort had appeared within a space of sixty years, then the rest of them were likely to see another uprising of evil before they died, but he pushed the thought as far down as it would go.

"Next one," Sirius said, and his voice traveled clearly into the study. "Bedimere Bradley."

There was a rustling of papers and then Ron cleared his throat. "Right. Blackmail and money laundering—and he's also the one that tried to bribe Moody, just before he got Stunned. It says in his file that he's willing to trade information for his freedom."

"That's not the way I work," Sirius said grimly.

"But let's put him on trial next," Ron suggested. "He might slip up, we might get something useful out of him—evidence against someone else."

"True. Put him at the top of the pile. Next one."

Remus half-smiled at the door, amazed at how much things could change in a short time. Sirius had hardly noticed that tonight would be the full moon. He hadn't hovered or worried, and the afternoon sun continued to mellow as the clock crept towards moonrise.

"Next one's Turika Hudu. Accused of harboring Death Eaters, and of providing her home as a prison for war captives." Ron gave a loud snort of a laugh.

"What?" Sirius asked.

"She played for Africa in the World Cup, when I was a kid. Incredible Beater. Her bat probably came in handy when she was torturing people."

"We don't know that she tortured—"

"I know." Ron was quiet for a moment and so was Sirius. There was another loud rustling of paper. "But they're not all bad," Ron said, after a while. "Marty Gudgeon's a real surprise—he's been a reserve Seeker for the Cannons for about seven years, and no one knew he could hit a Bludger 'til Oliver came along and stuck a bat in his hand. Harry and I had a great time watching him kick arse last night."

"It's good that Harry went with you," Sirius said at once. "How did he seem?"

Ginny looked up from the cauldron and turned her face to the door, and Remus watched her.

"Really good," Ron said, sounding as if he were surprised about it. "Really good. Normal—for Harry, you know. Quiet and all, but it's like he's got his sense of humor back. He only seemed upset towards the end of the match."

"Why?" Sirius's voice was anxious.

"Oh, it was nothing," Ron laughed. "Just Seeker rivalry. Knight missed the Snitch twice, and Harry kept tearing at his hair. He finally left his seat, and when he came back, he had a Butterbeer Extra in each hand. I tried to grab one, but he said they were both for him, and I'd have to go and get my own."

Ginny snickered and turned back to her cauldron, looking satisfied.

"Knight caught the Snitch in the end, of course," Ron continued. "Bloody great Seeker. Oliver did his usual routine—tried to throw his arms around her as soon as they'd won, but she just kicked him off and told him to go to hell." He laughed. "Saved it on my Omnioculars, if you want to see. Saved her catch, too—it was brilliant. Oliver's lucky he found someone to replace what he lost in Harry—"

"RePLACE?" Ginny yelled out so loudly that Remus jumped. She yanked her stirring rod out of the cauldron. "Replace? I hardly think so."

"Oh, SORRY," Ron yelled back. "Far be it from me to criticize him in front of his fan club—"

"Shut UP," Ginny warned, pushing a stray bit of hair out of her eyes.

"Shut u-up," Ron mocked in a high voice.

Remus laughed. He had got used to Ron and Ginny being around, behaving like siblings. It was somehow a comfort to hear their playful bickering. "Is that ready?" he asked Ginny, and pointed to the cauldron.

She nodded, and ladled a perfect serving into a goblet. It steamed and frothed as she carefully carried it to Remus's desk. "Here."

"Thanks." Remus took a deep breath, pinched his nose, and swallowed the dose in one gulp. It was disgusting. He fought his gag reflex, clapped the goblet onto the desk and moved his hand to his pocket for a Peppermint Imp, but Ginny was ahead of him. She held out an imp and dropped it into his palm. "Thanks again," he said, and popped it into his mouth.

"That's you taken care of," Ginny muttered to herself, and returned to her cauldron with a confident swirl of her work robes, to put out the fire and clean up the tools. Remus watched her work, still listening to Ron.

"And then Cole Kerry got the Quaffle and took off for the far end of the pitch—she's something else, the other teams do nothing but foul her—Burt Fuller flew straight at her, but he just pitched the ball to Newland and CLANG—another ten points! And then Oliver—"

"Ron," Sirius impatiently cut in. "Quidditch later. We have to finish this."

Ron heaved a sigh. "Next is Francis Coldwater."

"Male or female?" Sirius asked, and Remus could hear the furious scratching of a quill against parchment. He shivered a little at the enhanced sound. The wolf was coming.

"Female," Ron replied. "Geoffrey Coldwater's wife. Their files should go together, they're accused of the same thing."

"Which is?"

"Setting curse traps. There's evidence that they set traps outside of Hogwarts, and in Hogsmeade... and around individual homes. Apparently, they targeted the homes of Muggle-borns." Ron laughed harshly. "I take it back. Let's put *them* on trial next."

"They're being so morbid out there," Ginny said softly. She had put out the fire and was standing beside Remus, scanning the bookshelves which stood against the wall at his left.

Remus looked up at her, but her face was turned away. "Not deliberately," he answered. "What book are you looking for?"

Ginny shrugged. "Just looking." She kept her back to him and ran a finger across a row of spines.

"If you're that bored, you might want to get a head start on your N.E.W.T.s," Remus advised. "Home-schooled students will still have to take them. Start studying early or you'll be in a world of trouble—just ask Sirius."

"I'll be fine." Ginny didn't turn around, but she dropped her hand to her side.

Remus wasn't certain, but he thought he felt something strange in the air around Ginny. He was no Healer, but his senses were heightened as moonrise approached, and he felt as if his space were being... invaded. As if someone were tampering with his energy. He frowned at Ginny's back.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

Ginny didn't answer.

Remus scanned her posture, and his eyes came to rest on her hands; they were turned towards him, palms facing his chair. "Ginny? What is it?"

"Looking for a book," she attempted, but she moved her hands a little, and Remus felt a definite charge in the air between them.

"Stop it," he ordered. "Turn your hands around, Ginny. You're not practicing on me."

Ginny turned around and met his gaze, making no attempt to deny what she was doing. "Please?" she asked. "I need to work on someone, and—"

"No. Absolutely not. You'll hurt yourself." Remus shook his head. "You're still working on animals," he reminded her. "You promised not to rush—"

"Please." Ginny held out her hands in appeal. "You have to let me practice. I have to build up a tolerance or I'll never..." She colored, but didn't look away. "It's not fair," she added quietly. "You know it's not."

Remus knew. It wasn't fair that she was barred from the person she cared for most. It wasn't fair that she had been gifted and burdened with a talent she could not control. But there was nothing to be done about it. "Practicing on me isn't going to help you," he answered truthfully. "I've got—issues. And I don't say that lightly."

Ginny looked gravely at his face. "I know that, but—"

"No, listen." Remus laughed a little. "You don't know. You would certainly injure yourself, on my... energies."

"What, because it's a full moon? Too much wolf to get past?" She smiled a little, and Remus smiled back. She had been making the potion for so long now that he didn't mind her questions about the werewolf.

"No," he answered. "Under any circumstances, I would be difficult to work on. You'll have to wait. And don't even think of trying to work on Sirius. It would kill you."

Ginny made an impatient, whining noise. "What am I supposed to do?" she pleaded, and Remus knew that she was thinking of Harry. "I can't even stand near him," she said hotly. "He can't even come over—it's ridiculous." She marched over to her cauldron, snatching up her tools and wrapping them haphazardly in their various soft cloths. "I can't get next to him," she muttered, obviously too

worked up to be embarrassed about what she was saying. "You just don't know what that's like."

Remus cocked an eyebrow, wondering how old he must look to her. "Don't I?"

"If you did," Ginny returned, cleaning her cauldron with a snap of her wand and yanking it out of the fireplace, "then you'd let me practice." She put her tools into the cauldron and gave Remus a meaningful look. "I'm ready to practice. I *have* to. I wanted to clear it with you, but if you're going to hold me back, then—"

"Ginny." Remus looked steadily at her, and the wind seemed to go out of her sails.

"What?" she sighed.

"Do you honestly think I'm trying to hold you back?"

She looked at the floor. "No."

"I understand what you're feeling," he told her, and he couldn't help a smile when she looked skeptically up at him. "I do," he repeated. "But the fact remains that if you open yourself up to me, or to Sirius, then you'll get badly hurt." Remus paused, and carefully considered his next words. "We're off limits. And so is Harry."

Ginny's eyes clouded for a moment, and then realization dawned in them. "Are you saying..." she began slowly, "...that I can work with someone else, if I want to?"

Remus narrowed his eyes at her. "Someone very simple, Ginny—someone with little depth. No real complexity of nature—perhaps a child, or a childish person—"

Ginny was ahead of him again. "RON!" she yelled. "RON! I have to talk to you!"

"No, not Ron," Remus whispered. "I was thinking that you might want to work with your new nephew, or—"

"You said someone childish and simple," Ginny replied quickly, her eyes alight with excitement. "That's Ron. And I've so wanted to tell him that I'm a Healer—I just didn't want to say anything before I could really *do* something. RON!"

"I'M WORKING," he shouted back. "No respect for my professional life," he muttered to Sirius.

"Actually, we're finished for now." Sirius sounded amused. "Go and see what your sister wants. I'll see you at the office in the morning."

There was a long silence, an enormous shuffling of paper, and then the sound of heavy, reluctant footsteps. Ron appeared in the doorway of the study, looking put-upon.

"What?" he demanded.

"I'm walking you home," Ginny said breathlessly. She Banished her cauldron up to her room, forcing Ron to flatten himself against one side of the doorway as it sailed past. "I've finished with Remus," Ginny continued, "and there's something I want to tell you. I've got—" she paused, and grinned. "I've got some news."

Remus caught her eye and smiled. He could practically feel her enthusiasm, and though he was worried for her safety, he couldn't bear to hold her back any longer. He wondered briefly about his teacher's ethics, then decided not to think about it.

Ron eyed Ginny warily. "News?" he asked, looking a bit frightened. "What kind of news? It's... it's nothing to do with Harry, is it?"

"Oh, for the love of Merlin." Ginny glanced over her shoulder, and rolled her eyes at Remus. "News about *me*, Ron," she shot back. "Not some sensational story about my love child, or something."

"Stop!" Ron protested, putting his hands over his ears. "Sick."

Ginny nearly ran to him, and grabbed his arm. "Come on, let's go," she said eagerly.

"Be very, very careful," Remus called after her, as she and Ron disappeared down the corridor. "Tell Ron to contact Sirius right away if there are any problems. I won't be able to help tonight, but he'll know what to do."

"All right," Ginny called back. Remus heard the front door swing open.

"What problems?" Ron demanded. The door slammed.

Quiet filled the house for two luxurious seconds and Remus reveled in it. The light in the study was orange, and the moon was well on its way. It was nice to sit still in his own body and know that there would be no real problems when the other body came to claim him. It was wonderful to be—if not at peace, then as close to it as Remus imagined he could come.

There was a sudden noise of claws on hard wood floorboards, and a short, happy bark signaled to Remus that he was about to be assailed. Sure enough, a massive dog bounded into the study and jumped halfway onto Remus's desk, putting his messy paws on all of the papers, and knocking the goblet to the floor.

"Do you think you could possibly control that drooling?" Remus asked, looking from the dog's feral grin to the twin puddles that were gathering on his desktop. "Truly unattractive," he mur-

mured.

Sirius appeared before him at once, tall and offended. "I can't help it," he protested, sounding hurt. "I have trouble with loose gums."

"A sign of old age," Remus observed dryly.

"*Padfoot's* getting old," Sirius growled. "Dog years." He pulled his wand, and cleared all evidence of Padfoot's oral incontinence from Remus's desk. "Better?" he asked, in an obnoxious voice that meant he didn't care whether or not it was better.

"Much," replied Remus, holding in a smile. "And amazingly, I still have an appetite. I think I'd like a steak, as a matter of fact. Helps to control the cravings."

Sirius's joking expression faded. "You took the last dose?"

"Yes."

"And it's fine?"

"Yes."

"And you're fine?"

"I will be, when I've had a steak."

Sirius's pale eyes glinted. "I happen to make a damn good steak," he said, peering out the window. "And there's just enough time for it."

Remus left his desk. He spent the final hour before moonrise in the kitchen, eating and talking with Sirius, and feeling that his life could hardly be improved.

* * * * *

Thrilling with anticipation, Ginny shut the door and looked up at Ron. She had never had anything so important to reveal. Ron had; she remembered how he had come home from his first year at Hogwarts, bursting with pride and excitement over all he'd done. The only time *she* had told her family a secret, it had been dark and awful, and it had disappointed everyone.

Not this time.

"What problems?" Ron repeated, sounding torn between annoyance and anxiety. "He made it sound like you're going to raise the spirits of the dead. Contact Sirius if there are any problems and he'll know what to do? What's going on?"

"Well if you'd stop talking," Ginny said, hurrying to keep up with Ron's long strides as they walked away from Lupin Lodge and down towards the Notch. "And slow down."

Ron slowed his pace. Late afternoon shadows fell around them and a cold wind cut down the street, giving all the leaves in sight a furious ruffle and making Ginny shiver. She had forgot her cloak.

"Well?" Ron prompted, when she didn't begin.

Ginny hesitated. She had imagined, many times, telling everyone about her gift. She hadn't been able to tell anyone for herself yet—Remus had informed her that she was a Healer, and he must have spoken with Sirius. Harry had found out in the worst possible way. She wanted someone to be happy for her.

"It's about what I'm studying with Remus," she began. "I've been... taking an extra class."

Ron laughed. "Did Hermione trick you into it?"

"Hermione doesn't know about it. No one knows except for Remus and Sirius—and Harry." Ginny glanced sideways at her brother to gauge his reaction. Ron looked intrigued.

"What's the mystery class?" he asked.

Ginny searched herself for a dramatic, important way to say it, but it came out very simply: "Healing."

Ron's eyebrows shot up. "Oh—really? I didn't know you wanted to be a mediwitch, Ginny. That's cool. You could take over for Madam Pomfrey, or work at St. Mungo's—no! I know what you should do—work with Quidditch players and—"

"No, wait!" Ginny laughed. "Not medicinal magic." She took a breath and slowed down to watch Ron's face. "Empathic magic. I'm a Healer."

Ron's face was blank for a long moment, and then his eyes widened, his mouth gaped, and he tripped over a stone in the road. "You're joking," he whispered, when he had regained his balance. "Not a real Healer, like—like Gunhilda of Gorsemoor?"

"Oooh, someone passed his History of Magic exams," Ginny teased, tingling all over. Ron was impressed with her. She couldn't remember his ever having looked at her with such respect, not even during the war.

"No, be serious," Ron demanded, coming to a full stop and turning to face her. "A Healer? But

that's almost—they're so *rare*." He stared at her. "The Ministry could use one now, couldn't they? There used to be some that worked for... I think the Department of Mysteries? But no one knows for sure, of course—and then—"

"And then they were killed. And now there's me." Ginny felt, for the first time, a strange weight on her shoulders. She had rarely thought of herself as a professional Healer, active in the world. She had never imagined herself at the Ministry. The only goal in her mind, for quite some time, had been making herself strong enough for Harry.

"How do you know you are one?" Ron crossed his arms and peered into her face. "Don't you need to be—I don't know—tested?"

"No." Another cold, brisk wind skittered down the road, scattering dead leaves and gravel, and Ginny hugged herself. "Let's keep walking," she said, through chattering teeth.

She and Ron hurried forward. They turned onto the little path that crossed the garden of the Notch, and Ginny nearly ran to the door. Once inside, she wasted no time in lighting a fire, and then continued to explain to Ron, who stood like a statue by the mantelpiece, frowning at her.

"Remus worked it out," she said, "after I made the Wolfsbane Potion. I'd showed other signs—I knew things I couldn't have known. So he searched for a book on the subject, and I read it, and I just... knew." She sat in the corner of the sofa and cuddled into the cushions, basking in the warmth of the fire. "The more I practice, the better I get."

Ron was quiet. A clock ticked, in the little kitchen, and Hedwig hooted softly from Harry's room. Ginny made a clicking noise with her tongue, and the snowy owl flew out to perch on the arm of the sofa. She rubbed her smooth head on Ginny's shoulder.

"Good girl," Ginny murmured, and gave Hedwig an affectionate buss on the feathers. "You miss Harry when he's gone all day, don't you."

Hedwig hooted.

"So you're saying you're a Healer," Ron said flatly. He was still frowning. "Then... what can you do?"

Ginny shrugged. "Loads of things. Weird things. For example—" She turned to Hedwig and smiled. "Sit still, please." Ginny raised her hands and held them over the owl's warm, feathery body. Her eyes unfocused and she searched, with her extra sense, for any sign of distress.

But Hedwig was perfectly healthy, and Ginny had no work to do. Ron cocked his head to one side.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing. Hedwig's fine, so I'll have to work on you. Come sit by me."

Ron started. "What-me?"

"Yes, you." She patted the cushion next to hers. "Please, Ron. I want to show you, and I could really use the practice. I never get to practice on people."

"Oh, great. You're not going to damage me, are you?" Ron grumbled, but he had stopped frowning. He looked interested, and oddly shy. "I should just come sit over there?"

"Yes."

He came to the sofa and sat gingerly beside Ginny. Then, seeming to remember something, he sprang up and backed away from her, wide eyed.

"What?" Ginny asked, hurt. "I'm *not* going to hurt you. I promise."

"No it's not that—it's—" Ron was red. "I've read about Healers. Can't you... feel feelings? Other people's feelings?"

"Oh, that." Ginny laughed. "Yes. Come sit down."

"No way." Ron walked around the sofa, still red in the face. "No offense, Gin, but I don't really need you knowing all my—personal business."

Ginny pursed her lips. If he wasn't going to let her practice, then she was never going to get a chance to build up her strength. "Ron, I already know how you feel about Hermione," she said slowly.

But Ron had disappeared into the kitchen. "You know, I'll bet you can practice on Hermione, when she comes home. I had a letter from her this morning—she'll be home at the Winter Solstice—"

"Ron, don't change the subject," Ginny begged, turning around and kneeling up on the sofa, to plead into the kitchen. "There's nothing you can't tell me—I'm your sister."

Ron kept his back to her, and dug in the cabinets. "I know, and look, I'm massively proud of you and everything, don't get me wrong—"

"Please."

He turned around, pumpkin pasties in his hands, and met her eyes. "Ginny..."

"I'll just do a physical sweep," Ginny promised quickly. "I won't have to touch you at all, and I won't interfere with your emotions if you don't want me to. But you have to let me practice. You don't understand what it's been like." She took a deep breath, and decided to be truthful. "You remember the other week, when Harry and I weren't speaking, and you thought we were fighting—we weren't. Not really. It's just that when I get too near him, his presence overwhelms me and I—I pass out."

"You pass out?" Ron repeated doubtfully.

"Yes—once, I did. We had just started kissing—" Ginny stopped. She had to smile at the slightly nauseated look on Ron's face. "All right, sorry. Let's just say that I opened up to him too much, and I wasn't strong enough to handle it. He's been through a lot."

"Then won't you pass out when you... open up to me?" Ron asked, sounding very uncomfortable. "I mean, it's not like I haven't had my share of—"

"It's not the same," Ginny assured him. "It's not. Harry had a horrible childhood, on top of the rest of it. Also, I feel things for Harry that I don't—well." She giggled nervously.

Ron pulled a face. "Yeah, let's hope not."

"So can't I just try?" Ginny pleaded. "Won't you sit by me? I have to build up my strength, and I'd so much rather have you help me than anyone else. You're my favorite brother, you know."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Flatterer," he muttered. But he looked pleased, in spite of himself.

"No, really, you are," Ginny pressed, sensing how close he was to giving in. "And if you won't help me, then I'll have to ask the twins." She put out her bottom lip. "Don't make go to Fred and George. Have a little pity."

Sighing, Ron tossed the pasties onto the counter and came back around the sofa. "You owe me," he warned, and dropped onto the cushion beside her.

Ginny grinned, and threw her arms around him. "Oh, thank you," she said, squeezing him tight.

"All right, all right." Ron pulled out of her grasp. "Just—do whatever it is."

"Okay. You just sit still and stay quiet..." Ginny breathed deeply and shut her eyes. She held up her hands.

The first thing she felt was heat. Stronger than Harry's, stronger than Remus's—on par with Sirius's, perhaps. She moved her hands slowly from side to side, dragging her palms and fingers through the air around her brother. "Your energy's huge," she murmured, pulling her hands away to measure how far the heat radiated from him. "Wow."

"What does that mean?" Ron demanded. "Is it bad?"

"No—it's just you." Ginny smiled at the tension that had crept into his energy. "Relax," she said. "I'm just going to see if you're injured anywhere."

"Well, I think I twisted my—"

"Shh! Don't tell me. Let me work it out."

Ron went quiet and his tension abated; Ginny opened her eyes a little and moved to sit on the little table in front of the sofa, where she could face him. She held her hands over the center of his chest, passed them across his shoulders, and felt her way down both arms, through an unbroken shield of warm, magnetizing energy. When she came to his left wrist, there was a bump in the air—hot and tightly knotted—and she shut her eyes to feel it more fully.

"You twisted your wrist," she said, gently pushing her thumb against the knot.

"Right..." Ron sounded dazed. "Can you really *tell*?"

"Yes." Happiness flooded Ginny, and she had to wait and calm down before she could continue to work on him. She brought her fingertips to either side of the knot at his wrist, and began to knead it, taking care not to rush herself. She wasn't sure of what to do, but her reading had told her to trust her instincts, and her instincts told her to massage the pain and dissolve it into air.

Several minutes later, the knot was gone. Ron's energy was once again unbroken.

"Move your wrist," Ginny said, opening her eyes.

Ron bent his wrist back and forth, then stared at her. "It's better," he said, sounding as though he couldn't quite believe it. "That's amazing."

She grinned and blushed, not sure what to do with the compliment. It wasn't the way that she and Ron usually talked to each other. "Thanks. Oh—and there's a bit of a bruised patch here—" she let her hand hover just above his leg, and pointed to his knee. "But it's not in pain anymore. It's an old injury, isn't it?"

"That's exactly where Sirius broke it, third year," Ron said, still staring at her. "Ginny... do you have any idea what this means? Do you know how—how valuable you are?"

She shrugged, delighted. "I can't do much yet," she said, as modestly as she could.

"Do Mum and Dad know?"

"No—"

Ron's eyes flew wide. "No?" he nearly yelled. "Don't you want them to know? *Dad* should know!"

"Oh, don't tell them," Ginny pleaded. "I want to tell them myself, when I'm ready."

"Well, when's that going to be?"

"When I've practiced a bit more," Ginny said, biting her lip. "Can I practice a bit more?" she asked, and held up her hands. Ron nodded, and Ginny happily shut her eyes and brought her palms closer to his shoulders. She swept them up the sides of his neck, and brought them to hover in front of his face.

Ron began to laugh. "What the hell are you doing?" he said, and Ginny felt the vibration of his voice against her hands.

"Checking your face," she protested.

"My face is perfect, if you couldn't tell," Ron joked. "Get your hands out of it."

But Ginny's fingers were sensitive, and Ron's forehead was blistering with knots. They weren't hot—they were old and faded—but they were there. "Oh, you got hurt..." she breathed, and brought her hands higher up. The crown of his head was also riddled with knots—dark, bruised—no longer in pain—indicative of something that had happened. Recently. His temple positively throbbed.

"Well, Malfoy punched me there," Ron said matter-of-factly. "That's probably it."

"Yes... partly." Worried, Ginny worked her fingertips through the throbbing energy at his temple, and brought them back through the minefield of little knots that covered his forehead and skull. "But that's not all of it. You hurt your head. Repeatedly. Someone must've hit you, or—"

Ron's energy went cold all over, and Ginny felt it against her skin. Something frightening touched her heart.

"Probably a Bludger or something," he said tightly. "You're really good at this. That's about enough practice, don't you think?"

He was lying. His aura thrilled with fear—he was hiding something—the great warmth around him contracted, making the space around him feel empty and dead. Ginny opened her eyes and searched his. "What happened to you?" she whispered. "That's not normal—"

"Oh, come on, I've tripped and hit my head loads of times," Ron said, and gave a false laugh. "Get your hands down."

Ginny did not lower her hands; she felt around the sides of his head, and reached over his shoulders to test his back.

"I said, get your hands down." Ron was not joking. His voice was hard and flat. "Now."

"They hurt you," Ginny heard herself say, not knowing what she was talking about at first. "When they took you. Tell me what happened."

"Shut up."

But she couldn't. Something dark and ugly had happened to her brother, and he had kept it tight within himself for nearly a year. "Tell me," she repeated, bringing her hands to hover just above his heart. "I need to know."

"You don't want to know," Ron said quietly. "And I don't want to talk about it."

It was more than he had ever said to her, about his abduction, and Ginny's eyes filled with tears. Just hearing him acknowledge that it had happened made it feel real again, and immediate, and she had a strong urge to sob. Her head began to hurt. His energy, which had been simple and straightforward just a moment ago, was now deep and draining. She felt dizzy.

"You look sick," Ron said, after a moment.

"I'm fine," Ginny said automatically, shaking herself. If she could hear him out—if he would tell her what had happened—and if she could stay close to him while he did it... Remus would never allow her to try this, but she wasn't going to ask his permission. She needed more than practice, now. She needed to know what had happened to Ron. "Why haven't you ever told any of us about what they did?" she asked, meeting his eyes. "You didn't even tell Hermione or Harry, did you? Or Mum and Dad?"

Ron gave a quiet, bitter laugh, so unlike his usual one that Ginny felt a stab of nausea. "Tell Hermione?" he said softly. "What, after what they did to her parents? So she could imagine it in detail? I don't think so. And if you think I'd tell Mum what it's like to—" Ron stopped himself. "She'd go crazy thinking about how it was for Percy," he finished.

"But Harry?" Ginny pressed.

"Harry thought it was his fault." Ron sat back against the sofa cushions and leveled Ginny with his gaze. "He thought everything was always his fault. He still does. I'm not going to add to that."

Ginny's tears spilled over, and she bent double, burying her face in her knees. She didn't want to cry—she wanted to stay strong, and to build her endurance—but it was too much. Ron had never

inflicted the details of his experience on anyone; they were all buried close to his chest, and now that she had opened up to him, she could feel all of it. It pressed on her, and she ached.

Ron patted her head. "It's all right," he muttered. "It's over. I'm fine."

"No, you're not," Ginny sobbed. "I can feel it."

"You said you weren't going to do that!" Ron protested, but he kept patting her head.

"I-can't-help it," she managed. "I want you to-tell me-what happened."

She felt a very soft, brotherly kiss on the top of her head, and Ron sighed. "No. It's no good to bring it all up."

Ginny lifted her head and swiped at her eyes. "But you-have to," she choked, trying to regulate her breathing again. "Or it'll just-stay in you. Forever."

"There's no way around that," Ron said, with a wry smile.

"I know," Ginny said, squaring her shoulders and sniffing back the last of her tears. "But you can make it less horrible to remember. I can help."

Ron put his hands on his knees and looked at the floor. For a long time, he didn't answer. And then: "Can you?" he said abruptly.

"Yes."

"Do you know what you're doing?"

Ginny hesitated. "I'll know," she finally said.

Ron nodded. "What do I have to do?"

"Just talk."

He nodded again, and set his jaw. "It was Lestrage," he said distinctly, though his voice was very far away and he kept his eyes on the floor. "She bashed me over the head. Bone Crushing Curse. Not enough to knock me out, though. They needed me awake."

Ginny stayed very still. "They?" she asked quietly.

"Her. Her husband. Crabbe, Goyle-their dads, not Vincent and whatever."

"Gregory," Ginny supplied. "Where were you?"

"You know that," Ron said sharply.

"Just tell me everything again. Start from school. How did they-take you?"

"You *know* that," Ron repeated, turning angry eyes on her. "Can't I just--"

"No." Ginny touched his shoulder, and to her surprise, his posture relaxed. "From the beginning," she said, as gently and professionally as she could manage. Ron gave her a weary look, and returned his gaze to his feet. He propped his elbows on his knees and ran his hands through his hair, making it stick up nearly as badly as Harry's.

"Right," he began. "Well, for starters, I was knackered. Hadn't slept in two days, what with Head Boy business, studying for the N.E.W.T.s, looking after Harry, and trying to catch time with Hermione--" he laughed "--not like that ever happened. Anyway, it was two days before Christmas holidays, at lunch, when this little third year comes up and whispers to me that she's scared to go outside for Care of Magical Creatures, because she heard that there were creatures coming out of the trees." Ron rubbed his eyes. "I said, creatures? What do you mean? And she said that a Hufflepuff boy in her Herbology class had told her that he'd seen hooded creatures coming out of the Whomping Willow and going back in again. Of course *she* didn't know about the passageway, so I told her that it was a load of rubbish, and she had nothing to fear as long as she kept her eyes open and her wand ready." Ron sighed. "Then I took Hermione aside and told her that, at the first opportunity, we had to go out there and check that passageway all the way down to the Shrieking Shack, to make sure no one had found a way into Hogwarts again."

"And you didn't go to Professor McGonagall," Ginny mused.

Ron shrugged. "We never went to Dumbledore when he was alive. Why would we go to McGonagall?"

"All right. Go on."

"I wanted to tell Harry, but Hermione wouldn't hear about it. Hermione practically had kittens when I said we should go and get him to come with us. She said we'd wait till after classes, get you to stand in for us, and duck out of school before dinner to check the tree. So we lied to you. Hermione told you we really wanted to have a walk together, and you felt sorry for us and agreed to keep an eye on things, and we left the common room." Ron narrowed his eyes at his feet. "In the corridor, right outside the portrait hole, I said I had a bad feeling that someone was around. Hermione got out her wand and did a Tracking Charm, and you know that's just impossible in school. Too many footsteps everywhere, and we had no way of narrowing it down, so we just kept going."

"We got down about three flights of stairs when we heard shouting from right outside the Charms

classroom. A Ravenclaw seventh year had a Slytherin sixth year up against the wall—it looked like they'd been dueling, although now that I look back, it seemed... staged. Hermione froze them both in about two seconds, and gave them a furious lecture, and then hauled them off to McGonagall." Ron shook his head. "But first, she told me I wasn't to do anything without her. She told me to go upstairs and wait for her to come back."

"But you went." He was getting to the part of the story that no one had ever heard before. Ginny straightened her spine and tried to clear her mind of everything.

"I was worried about what that girl had said at lunch. It was dark, and it had been hours since I'd heard the rumor, and no one had made an attempt on Harry in months. It was all too dodgy. I went outside and jogged towards the tree. I heard Fang barking his head off, which only made me run faster. I got to the Willow and didn't see anyone around- I did Revealing Charms and stuff to be sure that no one was standing right beside me in an Invisibility Cloak, and then I did the stupidest thing I've ever done." He smiled slightly. "And that's saying something. I picked up a stick, prodded the knot, and got into the tunnel. I felt so sure that I could handle..." He stopped, shook his head, and stood up.

"Where are you going?" Ginny demanded.

"To get something to drink."

"No- sit down." Ginny pulled her wand, concentrated hard, and circled it above the table. Instantly there appeared a glass of water.

"Hey." Ron raised an eyebrow. "Materialization."

"Well, I *am* studying for the N.E.W.T's," Ginny reminded him, and because it had worked before, she touched his shoulder. "Please-keep going."

Ron gave her an apprehensive glance, then sat back against the sofa cushions and turned his face away. "I don't remember what happened in the tunnel," he said stiffly.

"None of it?"

"Someone shouting *Stupefy*, and when I woke up, I couldn't move. Or see."

Ginny braced herself. "Why not?"

"Blindfolded. Strapped to a-not a chair, really. More of a throne. They'd rolled up my sleeves and it was cold on my arms, I think it was made of pewter or something. I saw it later."

If Ron's voice had been distant before, now it was so far away that it was no longer his own voice at all. He spoke slowly and softly, as if in a dream. Ginny reached out her hands to feel the air around him. It was no longer dead and empty; the natural heat of his energy radiated around him again, but patches of it were cold and hard. Ginny found one with her hands and let her intuition guide her. Carefully, she began to massage the tension only she could feel. "Who was it that Stunned you?" she prompted, trying to keep the fury out of her voice.

"I don't know for sure," Ron went on, still sounding dazed. "But I'm betting on Crabbe, because it was him they were threatening when I woke up. Him and Goyle. The Lestranges kept ranting on about how they were supposed to come back with Harry Potter, not me. I was useless, they kept saying, and when the Dark Lord arrived, he'd do to Crabbe and Goyle what he'd planned to do to Harry." Ron gave a disgusted snort. "They had Goyle blubbering. Crabbe just kept saying that it wasn't his fault-and he said I wasn't useless at all. I was bait for Potter. Crabbe sounded pretty desperate, but he convinced the Lestranges to wait for Harry's arrival. I could tell by Crabbe's tone that he was bluffing-he didn't think Harry'd show up. He was just buying time. The Lestranges were smarter. *They* thought Harry would come."

"And you?" Ginny moved her hands to another cold spot, and began to work it as if she were untying a very complicated knot.

Ron turned and looked her in the eyes. "I knew he'd come," he said simply. "And Hermione."

Ginny moved her hands again, and Ron watched her fingers.

"What's that you're doing?"

"Helping," she replied. "Don't ask me to explain it. Just tell me what happened next."

Ron reached for his water and took a long drink. "I need something stronger," he muttered, when he set the glass down. "What happened next?" He gave a laugh that was half sigh. "Truthfully, it's a little pathetic. I had to sneeze. I couldn't hold it in-I tried. They realized I was awake, they stopped talking, and Mr. Lestrangle got right up in my ear and started-bribing me."

The heat began to drain from around Ron, and Ginny didn't know where to put her hands; it seemed the whole room was suddenly tight and cold. A wave of nausea rolled through her, and she felt her heart speed up to twice its normal rate. "How?" she asked, pressing her eyes shut.

Ron didn't notice her distress. "Money," he said. "Everything. Anything I wanted, he said. He knew I was poor, knew I felt it, knew where I was vulnerable. The Lestranges knew everything about

me. Everything. They must've picked Wormtail's brain and studied Crouch's notes—"

"Notes?"

"Well, there were just things they couldn't've known. My academic weaknesses. And Wormtail—well."

"He knew everything about all of us," Ginny said, trying to keep from slumping. Ron's emotions were growing rawer by the second, and his voice was speeding back to normal, as if now that he'd consented to talk, he couldn't stop.

"Everything, from how jealous I was of Harry, down to what I saw in the Mirror of Erised. Because I told him." Ron laughed coldly. "I used to talk to him, you know? The way kids talk to pets. Not realizing that he was listening. So LeStrange got up to my ear and fed it all back to me. You know you want this, he said, you know how you *really* feel about Potter. It's all right. It's natural. You've worked hard, and you'll always have to work hard, because you were born into your family. And what do you have to show for all you've done? How are you celebrated? You know what you're known as, don't you? Potter's sidekick. His tagalong. Your work is in his shadow, and you'll never have the recognition you deserve—not without help. Not while you're next to him. What makes you care about him—really? What did he do to *deserve* you? Or any of what he has, for that matter? Potter was *born*, that's all he ever did to get what he has. We're trying to set things right. You have to understand that our Lord only wants justice. Justice for people like us, who didn't get it easy and need a leg up in the world."

Ron was breathing heavily, and his face was flushed. His eyes had fallen shut, as if he were blindfolded again, hearing it all happen again. Ginny held her stomach with both hands, unable to help him any longer, hoping that she could stay alert long enough to hear him out, now that he had begun.

"He talked and talked. It felt like forever. I didn't move or make a sound but I hated myself for that hour because he was saying all the things I'd tried so hard to hide from everyone. He was right about me."

"No—"

"Yes." Ron's tone left no room for argument. "Don't hate me, Gin—I didn't mean to be jealous of Harry, but you can only stand by and watch the glory for so long before you get resentful—and I never, *never* acted on it, not when it counted, but I *felt* it, and that was enough to let LeStrange under my skin. And he knew it, and he kept on talking, telling me how undervalued I was, how talented and how brave, and what a pity it was that I was going to waste away as an extra at Potter's side, and how powerful I could be, and how wealthy I *would* be, and how much I was already valued by the Master and the Master's army, and how welcomed I'd be if I'd accept their help and give them mine. And when I still didn't answer, the LeStranges woman started laughing, from across the room. I heard her footsteps come towards me, and felt her get behind me and put her—hands on my shoulders."

Ginny opened her eyes—Ron's energy had changed again. She thought he might throw up. "What is it?" she managed.

"She just rubbed my shoulders," Ron answered weakly, his eyes still shut. "But God it was disgusting. I'd rather have the Cruciatus. Kept it up the whole time she talked. And she was talking about Hermione, telling me that the only way I was going to protect her from death was to join them. If money won't move you, she said, and if power's no object, then perhaps you'll give up your pride for your girlfriend's life."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. I *wanted* to. But all I had going for me was that they didn't know what was going on in my head. She kept going, saying things like 'It's too bad about her parents, isn't it?' and I kept wishing death on them and praying that Harry and Hermione wouldn't show up. But I wouldn't speak, I never spoke a word, and finally she let go of my shoulders and bashed me over the head. Hard. I shouted bloody murder and she laughed at me, said she was surprised I wasn't a mute. And then she did it again."

Ginny could hardly breathe. He was only telling her the things that words could describe, but she could feel the rest of it—his residual pain, the isolation and darkness he had felt, the helpless terror and the not knowing. The sickening fear that he would lead his friends into a trap and that he would never see his family again. A sob caught in her lungs and pressed against her ribs, and she shuddered.

Ron's eyes flickered to her and a guilty, worried look crossed his face. He shook his head. "You don't want to hear this."

Ginny pulled her knees up under her chin, and hugged her legs. "Talk."

"Are you going to pass out?"

"No."

Ron didn't look convinced, but he continued. "Lestrangle said she knew that Harry had a Secret-Keeper, and she knew that I knew who it was. All I'd have to do to go free, she said, was name the person. *That* was the first time I spoke. I started laughing and asked her if she'd ever read anything about the Fidelius Charm, because if she had, then she might've noticed that it's dependent on absolute secrecy. If Harry's got a Secret-Keeper, I told her, then I'd hardly know about it, would I?" He gave a dry laugh. "And that's when I found out what the Cruciatus feels like."

Ginny could tell that he was trying to smile, to make light of his memory; but he failed. His face was very white. And though her stomach was tight with nausea and her head felt light and achy, Ginny couldn't help but put out her hand and grope for Ron's. He took hold of her fingers.

"You've never felt it, have you?" he asked, glancing at her. Ginny shook her head. "Good. It's as bad as they say it is. Worse. I screamed-begged her to stop-tried not to blubber, but it's not the sort of thing you can help. She stopped, and asked me again for information. I told her she could-" Ron said a few words that made Ginny glad that Hermione wasn't within earshot. "And she put the Curse on me again. Several times. By the middle of the night-or early the next morning, I don't really know when-I was in so much pain that if I'd had any information to give, Harry might've been in danger. But I knew nothing."

"Harry never had a Secret-Keeper."

"I didn't know that at the time and I'm glad I didn't. By the next day-I think-all four of them were in on it. Harry hadn't come, and they were starting to panic. They even wasted Veritaserum on me, and got no thanks for it. They had nothing to give Voldemort, not even information, just miserable useless me."

"Ron."

"Their words, not mine. I had four Curses on me at once, and them all screaming at me-you're Potter's best mate, do you think we'll believe for a minute that you're this clueless?" Ron rubbed his temples. "But I was. And finally the Lestrangle woman stopped them and grabbed my face in her hands and got so close that I could smell her breath, and she said that the one they really needed to interrogate was the girlfriend with the brains. She shouted at Crabbe to go and take any measures necessary to get Hermione, if Harry was still out of reach. She said she'd take my blindfold off when my sweetheart arrived, so I could watch everything. And her husband started laughing, and in this really sick voice he said *everything*. And for a second I thought I was going to break the straps on my arms and legs, I was so angry."

"Ron." Ginny didn't know what else to say. She squeezed her brother's fingers and kept listening.

"At the end of that day, Crabbe returned empty-handed. Said he couldn't find Hermione or Harry, and it wasn't safe to trespass on Hogwarts' grounds at the moment. All I heard in reply was a crack and a thud from the other end of the room, and Goyle started blubbering again. Mr. Lestrangle started muttering to his wife about letting Voldemort deal with me-the Master, he said, had ways of getting information out of people. I felt hands on my wrist, felt the strap coming loose, and assumed they were taking me to Voldemort. I thought, if only I hadn't just been Cruciatus Cursed to within an inch of my life, I could really fight right now-it seemed stupid of them to let my wrist go when there are ways of keeping a person bound and transporting them. But I was too drained to think straight. The hands on my wrist left the strap slightly loose and moved around to my other side. I felt some sort of silky material between my skin and the fingers that were touching me-at first, I didn't know what to make of it, and then-"

Ron stopped and clenched Ginny's hand, and she felt a rush of love and gratitude so strong that it was nearly as overwhelming as the pain she had felt earlier, only its effects were quite the opposite. Ginny found herself able to sit up straight again, without pain.

"I felt that weird silky material on my ear," Ron said quietly, his eyes shut. "I felt breath. And I heard her say 'It's me, Ron, don't move.'"

"Hermione," Ginny murmured.

"She'd left Harry behind a tapestry-we were too big to get under the Invisibility Cloak all at once anymore. I didn't know it at the time, but she'd practically had to cripple Harry to get him to stay in the corridor-she didn't want him coming into the room, didn't want him to be discovered for any reason. And we might've been able to take them by surprise if it weren't for bloody Crouch and his Defense Against the Dark Arts lessons. They *knew* I couldn't fight the Imperius. They knew it."

Ginny held his hand more tightly still. His voice was harsh, and his shame and anger flooded the air.

"They put the Curse on me just as Hermione was loosening the last strap on my ankle, so that I'd go without a struggle. Of course, they thought they'd still have to untie me, but I was already untied, so I pulled out of my bonds and stood right up to go with them. I felt Hermione's hands

grip my robes to stop me—which of course everyone could see—Lestrangle started laughing, and then Hermione's hands were gone and I heard her struggling against him. I could hear it. I could have reached up and taken off my blindfold and helped her, but I just stood there and listened to her fighting—and losing. And then the Lestrangle woman pulled off my blindfold and told me to watch. And I did." Ron began to shake. "I just watched them pin her hands behind her back and force her into the same chair where I had just been—they didn't even bother strapping her in. Lestrangle got her wand and Goyle stepped up and shot the Cruciatus Curse at her before she even had a chance. She was yelling for me—trying to get me to snap out of it—and then she'd start screaming again—and I did nothing."

Ron pulled his hand free of Ginny's, put his elbows on his knees, and buried his face in his hands.

Ginny's first instinct was to embrace her brother, but even as she reached out an arm, a large knot in the air in front of Ron stopped her. There was something else. There was something more terrible than everything he had just told her. Though her stomach was gurgling unpleasantly, and a small sweat had broken out across her skin, she knew that she was alert enough to carry on. Ron's shoulders heaved, and Ginny closed her eyes, holding both hands out in front of him, and pulled softly. She felt the cushions on the sofa shift, and she knew that he was upright again.

"You must have done something, Ron," she said, her eyes still closed. "Because you're here, and Hermione's here, and Harry's here. What did you do?"

There was silence for several minutes, and Ginny continued to breathe deeply and pull at the air around Ron. Then: "It was Harry. He stopped it."

"He gave up his hiding place?"

"Yes." Ron was speaking very slowly now, as if he were once again experiencing the helplessness of the Imperius Curse. "He'd been watching through the door. He surprised them... disarmed Goyle and knocked out Crabbe. I'm not sure how, exactly. I was too busy arguing with the voice in my head." He laughed. "It was probably really funny to watch, actually. All the time they were torturing Hermione, I would take one step toward her, and then one step back. I was fighting with myself, deciding whether or not to get over there to help her."

"So, did you snap out of it?" The knot in the air had moved downwards, towards Ron's heart, and Ginny felt something like panic. She'd never felt this much *movement* in an aura before—she knew how to deal with head and back injuries, but Ron was hiding a secret that was buried so deep that she felt as if she needed a mediwizard license just to uncover it. Remus was going to kill her. Why did she never listen to him?

"Harry threw me Hermione's wand and I was able to catch it. Mr. Lestrangle was laughing—he started shooting little sparks and arrows in Harry's direction. Let's have some fun with the great Harry Potter, he said. They were so stupid—Harry could withstand just about anything at that point. Then everything happened so quickly. The Lestrangle woman's voice was in my head. We can't take everyone to see the Master, she said. Why don't you use that wand in your hand to help us?"

Ginny snorted, despite herself, at the impression Ron was doing of the woman's sickly soft voice.

"Yes, shut up," Ron answered. "She kept talking to me like that—bribing me some more and offering to spare my life if I would Well, anyway. She got tired of trying to persuade me and I saw her rolling up her sleeve and getting ready to touch the Dark Mark on her arm with her wand when I heard Hermione moving on the floor. She said ... she loved me She'd never really said that before, I mean, we'd never..." Ginny allowed herself a smile at her brother's embarrassment, but still did not open her eyes. She could guess he was very red. Recovering herself, she continued to dig with her fingers. The knot seemed to be loosening.

"Kill Hermione. That's what the Lestrangle woman wanted me to do."

A soft wind blew around them. Perhaps Ron was causing it, or perhaps they both were. Ginny couldn't tell if it was pain leaving Ron, or if she had naturally conjured up something to soothe him. Her fingers seemed to move without permission; she had no control over them. It frightened her for a moment, but "*Give into your power*", she remembered reading. "*When it becomes second nature, give in.*" She did not stop her hands.

"Kill Hermione. She kept repeating it. Over and over and over again." Ron made a noise like pain. "For a second it made sense in my head and I... She even gave me back my wand so that I could do it with greater force. I raised it. I—I actually pointed it." His voice was heavy and shaking—the knot of all his hidden emotion pulsed beneath Ginny's hands.

"But Hermione's still alive," Ginny said gently, and waited for Ron to answer.

"Yes," said Ron, and suddenly, the knot went taut and hard—Ginny felt her lungs constrict. She couldn't breathe or move, but her fingers pressed insistently against the anger and fear in the air as Ron continued. "I pointed my wand at Mrs. Lestrangle," he said slowly. "Ginny, I killed her."

The knot snapped. There was a wild unraveling, and warmth surrounded them; Ginny gasped for breath and fell forward into the empty space where the pain had been. She hit her chin on Ron's shoulder and groaned, but he didn't help her up—she struggled to sit straight again and when she finally opened her eyes, Ron was looking at her, his face full of wonder.

"I killed someone," he said, almost as if to himself. Then, a bit louder, "I used the Killing Curse. I didn't even know I could do it. I didn't even know *how* to do it. But there was a flash of green light just like..." He pressed his mouth shut and didn't open it for a long time. "What kind of person am I that I can do that?" he finally said, looking into Ginny's face as if she were the only person who could help him.

Ginny felt as if her blood were running cold. She could hardly move her mouth to speak; an exhaustion so complete had drugged her senses. "Hermione and Harry saw?" she managed.

Ron nodded. "But they've never mentioned it."

"They love you."

He didn't answer. For a long time there was silence, and Ginny felt something new in the air between them. A need for absolution.

"Dad killed Malfoy," she said thickly, fighting sleep.

Ron's face relaxed a little. "I know."

"Harry killed Voldemort."

"Yes."

"You *saved* Hermione." Ginny let her eyes fall shut, but not before seeing something good and clean dawn in her brother's face. "You made the right choice," she murmured. Sleep swept around her in thick, dark, soundless waves—but the story wasn't over. She wanted to ask Ron how they had made it out of that place—what had happened afterwards and how Hagrid had come to be there... she knew that Hagrid had died that night, but no one had ever told her how...

Distantly a clock struck, and to Ginny it seemed that every chime pushed her further into darkness. With a long breath, she let her mind relax, and gave into the swirling comfort of sleep.

"Harry should be home soon," Ron said quietly.

Sleep vanished, but Ginny didn't move. Harry would Apparate into the room at any moment, and if she asked him to then he would hold her. She wanted him to hold her. She *deserved* it.

"Then I can't stay," she made herself answer, and struggled to open her eyes and stand up. She wasn't surprised to feel Ron's arm slip under her shoulders.

"I could carry you," he offered.

"No, I can walk. Just help."

Ron supported her home. He helped her through the dark and quiet house, into her room, where they both stopped and listened to a wolf's piercing howl, and a dog's returning bark.

"Want pyjamas?"

Ginny shook her head. "Too tired to change." She fell into bed and let Ron tuck her blankets around her.

"Once upon a time, in a far off land," he said quietly, in a voice startlingly like their father's, "there were six mighty wizards and a powerful witch."

"Oh my God." Ginny giggled and shut her eyes. "Not that old thing."

"If the first five wizards were mighty, then the sixth one was absolutely brilliant," Ron continued with a grin in his voice. "And luckily for the witch, he was usually around to make sure she didn't pass out in the street."

"Shut up," Ginny mumbled, and curled on her side.

"He was so amazing, in fact, that every woman in the world was in love with him—he got loads of fan mail—so much that he just couldn't answer it all. So he employed a rough looking kid with black hair and glasses to do it for him..."

Ginny would have laughed if she hadn't just dropped off the precipice of sleep and into her waiting dreams. The last thing she heard was a quiet "Thank you" and in her dream, someone with a very large, warm hand was ruffling her hair.

The Mead-Drinking Skrewt-Hugger

George was dreaming again. They'd knocked something over and it was bouncing, pounding up and down. BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! Rosmerta, pulling out of his grasp, stilled; she looked over his shoulder to see a barrel of mead bouncing away through the cellar. She turned furious eyes on him.

"Now you've done it, you idiot *child!*"

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Sighing, George opened his eyes, realizing only belatedly that something really was pounding.

It was Fred, pounding on his door. "Oy! George! Wake up! You were supposed to open the store today! It's your turn! We're lucky one of Gladrag's staff called Angelina and me when he saw the store was still dark."

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

George knew Fred wouldn't stop until he'd opened the door to the cottage his brother had, until recently, shared with his wife. He pushed one hand through his hair and absentmindedly stroked his chin.

"George! Are you all right? I'm warning you, open up or I'm coming in—and I don't care who you have in there!"

George flung open the door. "There's no-one here, you idiot. No sod off. I'll be down at the shop in a few minutes."

Fred paid him no attention, walking right passed his twin and into the sitting room. He took in the empty bottle of Ogden's Best, and turned to face his twin.

George felt like hell, and he'd rarely seen reproach in Fred's eyes.

"Bugging Aberforth, George, what the hell is wrong with you? It's not that damned woman, is it?"

George shrugged. That woman—he refused to damn her, although he might have done last evening—had changed everything. And then she'd refused to see him again. "Not as more than friends, George," she'd said a few days after the wedding. He refused to believe it.

"That's it, then. You march your arse right down there this morning—it's only 10:30, she won't be open but she'll be there—and do something about it. And if she bloody well refuses to see you, then, by Merlin, *get over it.*"

Fred continued. "You don't even love her. You're just dazzled because she's the first woman you've... well, the first woman since the war. You're so happy the damned war is over you've fallen for the first... I mean, the first pretty face."

George got angry, then. "What the hell do you know about it? What about Angelina?"

Fred grinned, in spite of himself. "What about her? I've loved her since before the war began. Hell, don't you remember when we 'said goodbye'?"

"Shut up. Come on, we have to get to the shop."

"Angelina's more than capable of minding it, and I'm going now anyway. But don't bother showing up until you've straightened this thing with Rosmerta out."

George found himself in front of the Three Broomsticks not twenty minutes later. He tried the door—she didn't open the pub until eleven—but it wasn't locked.

He entered the pub and stood for a moment while his eyes adjusted to the dark interior.

She was behind the bar, looking at him. "Hello."

"Hello." He stood for a moment longer, uncertain.

"What brings you here?"

"You know damned well what brings me here. For Merlin's sake, woman, don't you know how special that was?"

By Heather. A/N: Several of the best lines in here can be credited to Honeychurch and Carleton97, particularly "Bugging Aberforth, George!" Many thanks to Arabella and Honeychurch for working it all out with me and providing fantastic betas!

She smiled then. "I know only too well. But George, we've been through this. We're from different generations. You have your living before you. A wife, a home." Her voice softened. "Babies. I can't give that to you, and I won't take it away from you."

George felt raw. "That was special," he continued stubbornly. "It's never been... it's never been like that." He didn't know how to explain to her that he needed her.

"George. It was, certainly. It wasn't like that before because you were never free to feel with abandon before." She grinned. "You're a very attractive man. Very... very hard to resist. You'll find love with some girl... I won't keep you from that."

"I think I love you."

She looked a bit startled at that. "I don't doubt that you think you do. But there's another difference, you see. I've been in love before. I've had it, pure and true and beautiful. And I won't let you settle for something else." She dropped her gaze for the first time. "I don't love you, dear. You're a wonderful man, but you aren't for me."

"I went to school with your mother, for Merlin's sake, George! You can't take me home on holidays, a dried up old barkeeper. Don't think I'm not tempted. You have a knack for making a woman feel very... extraordinary. But George, love, it can't work. It's better not to let it go beyond this. We're friends. I want it to stay that way."

"As you wish," he said very tightly, and he turned and went out into the late September morning.

He ran right into someone in his haste to leave the Three Broomsticks behind. His eyes hadn't adjusted to the bright sunshine.

She flicked a long braid over one shoulder and pushed her blonde fringe out of her eyes. Brown, flashing, irritated eyes. "Why the bloody hell don't you watch where you are going?"

Despite himself, he grinned. It wasn't often a woman would curse him, standing toe to toe and nearly eye to eye. "Er, sorry, didn't see you."

She heaved a great, annoyed breath then. "Right. You didn't see tiny little me with the tiny little lapdog."

That's when he noticed Fang. Hagrid's boarhound. *Hagrid's dog*, and this girl who could nearly look him in the eye had him. "What are you doing with Fang?" he asked, perhaps a bit louder than necessary.

"Hagrid left him to me, you idiot. Get out of my way. I have errands to run and a *job* to do."

Evidently she thought him some kind of unemployed drunkard. She had a point, however. He had a terrible hangover and he hadn't shaved in several days. His goatee could use a trim.

He probably looked pretty awful, and running down a perfect stranger and then shouting at her wasn't a good way to make a first impression.

"Look, I'm sorry. I've had a terrible morning and... well anyway, I'm sorry for yelling at you and I'm sorry I ran into you." He stuck out a hand. "George Weasley. Friends?"

She looked skeptically at his hand. "I know who you are. And you're definitely sorry. All right then, apology accepted." With that and a quick handshake, she turned and went into a nearby shop.

He was nearly back to the shop when he realized he didn't know her name.

* * * * *

George looked up as the shop door bells announced the arrival of a customer. It was Neville. "Neville! It's great to see you," he said, and it was. "How're things up at the castle?"

"All right, I suppose. We're having a bit of trouble with some of the animals in the forest. You know, the new gamekeeper is great, but it's just not the same... oh, but that's not why I'm here. I need something really great to give a ten year old for Christmas. He's my, er, sort of nephew. He's my great-uncle's great-grandson, anyway. What do you think?"

George considered for a moment. "We've got this new Quidditch game, but they're still hand-made. We've got the floor model here—" he stepped to the games counter and removed the cover from the Quidditch game, and the small model came alive. "You pick your teams. Takes a few weeks to make, so if you want one, you'll need to order it within a couple of weeks to get it for Christmas."

Neville looked fascinated with the model. "How much do these run?"

George named a price. "Steep," Neville grinned. "But well worth it. I've never been able to give him anything great, and this year I can. Any teams? Any at all?" George nodded. "Then I'd like one that features Bayern Würtzberg and the Bantry Banshees, from the European Cup three years ago."

"A true fan, then, is he?"

"Yeah. Loves Quidditch, and he's damned good at it. We're hoping he makes the Gryffindor team. Well, assuming he makes Gryffindor, but he's ten times as brave as I am and I made it."

George concluded the sale. "I'll run it up in a few weeks when it's done. I know you're busy trying to get everything in order again."

Neville thanked him, and left. George knew it wasn't necessary to take the game up in person, but it would be great to see the old place. And maybe ask around about Fang.

* * * * *

Meg Castellwild was tired. Sometimes she thought that the job she'd taken on was too big for her. Today was one of those days. The unicorns still didn't trust her and the damned centaurs never gave anyone a straight answer. She wasn't normally such a whinger, but today had been more than she could take.

She missed Hagrid—more on the hard days like today.

Sinking into a giant-sized chair in Hagrid's cabin—hers, now—she lifted the goblet of mead. Fang snored near her feet. She was getting a headache, and she didn't want to bother Madam Pomfrey. Poppy, rather—she was a colleague, after all. She reached for the small jar of headache powder on the table. She wasn't supposed to put it in mead, strictly speaking; it intensified the effects of the alcohol tri-fold. But it would relieve the pain, and she downed the powder and the mead at once. The warm, relaxed feeling was welcomed—she reached for the bottle of mead. It wouldn't hurt to have another goblet.

Relaxed by mead, her mind began to wander. George Weasley's joking face appeared, and Meg cursed. She hadn't thought about Weasley since he'd left school—not much, anyway—and his ridiculous, offhanded offer to be friends had resurrected the crush she'd had on him at school.

Not that he'd noticed, now or then. She had no intention of making an idiot of herself now any more than when she'd been at school. Weasley was a brash, silly Gryffindor, and she had better things to do than moon over him.

Resolution made, she turned on the wireless and pulled out a piece of parchment. She wasn't too drunk to write, and she wanted to write a story about Hagrid.

* * * * *

George hovered the Quidditch game next to him while he knocked on the door of the third greenhouse. He could see Neville inside, and was anxious to show him the game. He was proud of it; it was really life-like. Brand new and sparkling, it would be even more impressive than the example in the shop.

"George! Come in, it's freezing!"

George pulled the game out of the box, showing Neville all the features and enjoying the rapt look on his old housemate's face. "Wow! Frank's a reserve player!" George had added a feature for his old friend—using a picture provided by Neville, he'd made it possible for Frank, Neville's nephew, to put himself in the game.

"How's rebuilding?" George asked.

"I've been down at the gardens today, fertilizing for spring planting."

"This soon?"

"Well, yes, the ground needs to be prepared properly or the gardens won't be able to provide enough vegetables for the school next year."

"Oh, right. But I thought that was the groundskeeper's job? Haven't you got one yet?"

"Yes, a rather capable one, but she's not as confident about the plants as she is the animals."

"She?"

"Yeah. Hagrid's star pupil, his assistant last year. Megan Castellwild. Hufflepuff... took over when Hagrid... when Hagrid left us, and she's just sort of stayed on. I suppose McGonagall's offered her the job, you know, formally, but there was never a question she'd get it."

George felt a little bit strange. This was something he should have known. "Is she living in Hagrid's house?"

"Yeah. Go on over and say hello. I've got to get this alihotsy replanted."

"Right then. I hope Frank enjoys the game. See you soon, then."

With that, he was off. George made his way down the hill toward the hut near the forest's edge. He knocked, and the door was opened, but not immediately.

"What are you doing here?" the woman asked, holding on to the door and throwing a blond braid over her shoulder nervously.

"Miss Castellwild? I'm working on our friendship."

"Look, Weasley, I don't have time tonight. I don't feel up to 'working on our friendship,' or whatever you're calling it. Good day," she concluded. She was looking rather wobbly as she made to close the door.

She couldn't close it, because he was holding it open. "Come on, I'll make you a cup of tea."

He pushed inside and did just that, ushering her back to her favorite chair and presenting her with a cup of earl grey. "Where are you from, Megan Castellwild?"

"Wales, of course."

"Why is it 'of course'?"

"My name's Welsh."

"Anyway, it's beautiful there. What part of Wales?"

"Llansteffan."

"Why didn't I know you at school, Meg?" George leaned in closer, trying to get a fix on this woman.

"I was a year younger and in Hufflepuff. I wasn't good at Quidditch and I doubt you even looked at me twice. Not like I—and half the girls at school—looked at you."

She's been drinking, George thought, *or she'd never had admitted to that*. She looked a bit embarrassed, come to that.

He laughed. "My loss." This woman intrigued him. She would take his mind off of *her*.

She looked irritated. "Weasley, I don't know what you're playing at. I've had a headache powder and a bit of mead, and I can tell something's got you bothered, but if you've come here for an ego-stroking, then you're out of luck."

George felt startled. "What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"Go hassle whoever it is that's really on your mind, and leave me out of it." She got up then, and it was clear she wanted him to leave.

"But..."

"Look, I said we were friends, and we can be. But I'm not playing this game with you." She grasped the door, leaning against it for a bit of balance. "I won't play because it wouldn't be a game to me. So just don't, okay?"

George didn't know what to make of her. He touched her hand then, just to see what she'd do. She snatched it back away, and she looked furious. With him? Or herself?

"I'll be back, you know."

"I know."

* * * * *

George was warming up to his subject again, a week or so later. "And then she had the nerve to tell me to sod off until I'd gotten over Rosmerta!"

Fred raised one eyebrow. "She knows about that, does she?"

"Well, no. But that's what she meant."

"She's got a point. Get over her."

"I have."

"Have you? Have you been down the Three Broomsticks, then? Because last I heard you'd been taking your business to the One Eyed Witch."

"It's just easier not to look at her."

"Well then, you've just made my point, haven't you?"

"Hell, I'll go down there, if it will shut you up."

He did. He'd been amazed. She gave him a warm feeling, but not the crazed, half possessed feeling. She'd been right. He'd been deluding himself, thinking great sex must mean love.

Fred had laughed so hard at that confession that he had come as close as he ever had to breaking his twin's nose.

"Oy, shut up."

* * * * *

Christmas was fast approaching, bringing the New Year with it.

Fred had suggested a party to George, one that would ring out the old and ring in the new. Properly. They'd invite their year in Gryffindor and their friends and families. It was set to be a fantastic party.

It didn't take long for word to get around. George realized that the cottage Fred and Angelina occupied couldn't possibly hold everyone.

He'd gone to see Rosmerta. It was finally okay to see her. And so, they were having the New Year's Eve party at the Three Broomsticks.

* * * * *

He hesitated a moment before knocking on her door. In one hand, he held a bunch of flowers—he didn't know their names—and he'd made an effort to clean himself up.

"Weasley, what are you..." her voice trailed off as she spied the flowers, and one elegant eyebrow lifted. "Well, then. Come in," she said as she took the gift.

"Bit of a piece offering. I came up to... I came up to ask if you'd like to come to a party Fred and I are hosting at The Three Broomsticks on New Year's Eve? With Lee? Our old friend from school? I'm sure you know him..."

Meg grinned. "Well, Weasley, this is the first time I've ever seen you speechless. Are you asking me for a date?"

"Er, yeah. And my name's George."

"I'm set to meet friends on New Year's Eve. Would it be all right if...?"

"Yeah, bring them to the party."

They spent a lovely hour on Hagrid's giant settee, talking about school and old times. When he rose to leave—"It's late, and you are probably tired"—she followed him to the door.

He stepped close to her and she looked down. "Just be there, ok?" He touched her palm, and his other hand found her arm. He leaned in to kiss her, but she'd turned her head, and he found her cheek, rather than her lips.

"Too fast, Weasley."

"Yeah, all right. But New Year's?"

"We'll stop by."

"Good."

— CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN —

The Seeker

It was colder than Penelope had expected. She pulled her hood up, shut her cloak against the bitter December wind, and stared at the slate gray sea.

She was unsure of why she had come. It had been one of those mornings—they'd been much less frequent since Leo's birth, but they still happened—when Percy's absence had weighed on her like an illness. She couldn't stay at the Burrow. She couldn't touch Leo without being overwhelmed by depression. It was wise, she knew, to leave him with Molly and to take a day alone, even if it made her feel like an unfit mother to need that.

She hadn't known where she was going when she had left the house. She'd merely walked toward the village until it had come into view, and then she had pulled her wand and given it a definite twist.

Now, sitting on a slab of stone and watching the cold tide roll along the rocks, she was no closer to understanding her choice of destination. But at least she could breathe, here. She shut her eyes and took icy air into her lungs, tasting the tang of salt and wind. Space. She needed it. To think, to plan, to become herself again. And Molly would understand about the new flat. After all, Penelope couldn't move out until after Christmas; the lease did not begin until February.

February. Penelope knew she'd tear the month out of her calendar and throw it away.

"Who's there? Identify yourself!"

The sharp voice startled Penelope; she jumped and turned to face it.

"Get that hood off your face." Mad-Eye Moody limped over the rocks towards her, wand out, eye rolling, eyebrows gathered so tightly in concentration that they looked like one wiry caterpillar in the middle of his forehead.

Penelope pushed back her hood with a slow, wandless hand, and showed herself.

Moody relaxed. His wand hand dropped and his scars shifted into something like a smile. "Pleasure to see you, Miss Clearwater—that is, Mrs. Weasley—" Moody stopped. His good eye winced and his face shifted again, becoming darker and more gnarled than usual. "What would you prefer to be called?" he asked, his voice warm and gruff.

"Penelope," she said, and stood up to give him her hand. "How are you, Professor?"

"Oh now." Moody flushed a bit and waved her off. "You're under no obligation to do that. You were never a student of mine. Just Moody'll do."

"All right."

"You've come out to have a look around, I expect. Thought you would. Arthur says you've had your notes out lately."

"Yes, I've been working—just a little."

"Care to see the place?"

Penelope nodded. She hadn't been to Culparrat, and though she was no further along in the process of formulating an Imprisonment Enchantment, she suddenly knew why she had come here. She needed to work again. Truly work, not just fiddle with the notes from last year, which were covered in Percy's slim, slanted writing.

She followed Moody away from the bay and around a hillside covered in sea grass, towards what looked to be a deep, well-hidden cove.

"Muggles can't see any of this," said Moody, without looking back. He scraped along the shore with the help of his walking stick. The weak sun glinted on his random patches of silver hair. "Looks like marsh bog to 'em."

Penelope thought immediately of her father, who had never been able to comprehend the idea that Hogwarts was hidden from those who refused to see it. It should have made perfect sense to

him—he had refused to see it, believe in it, or pay for it. Penelope had been one of the very few scholarship students at the school; it was part of the reason she had often “volunteered” to help Madam Pince in the library, but few people knew that. And none her friends in Ravenclaw had known that Professor Vector had come, in person, to convince her mother that Hogwarts was a safe and appropriate place for a young witch.

Her mother had thought it was a cult. Penelope was almost amused, now, by the summers she had spent being prayed over, the hours she had listened to her mother beg heaven to save her daughter’s soul. But it hadn’t been amusing at twelve. Or thirteen, or fourteen. She might have gone mad if it hadn’t been for Percy’s fervent, daily letters, the summer of her fifteenth year. Every letter had come just when she needed it most, and each one had made her father’s refusal and her mother’s fear seem a little smaller. A little less important. When they’d got back to school, she had told Percy everything. He’d had a hard time believing that anyone’s family could be so strange, and he had written to her parents, the minute she’d been Petrified. They had never written back. When she had awoken, Percy had promised she’d never have to live with them again after Hogwarts, if she didn’t want to. And she never had. She’d rented her own flat near his, and it had all been so wonderful for a little while.

It would be nice to be back in a flat of her own.

“How’s your son?”

Penelope snapped out of her thoughts, surprised at herself. It had been a long, long time since she’d reflected on those things. “He’s doing very well, thank you. Getting perfectly *huge*.”

“Cute kid.”

“How do you—”

Moody snorted. “Seen enough pictures, haven’t I? His grandfather’s gone a bit loony in his old age. Seems to forget he showed me the album before.”

Penelope smiled, and stepped over a boulder. Arthur was such a sweet man. Almost a father, really. “Well I’ll bring Leo to meet you in person,” she said. “Pictures really don’t do him justice.”

“Ah, it’s a proud mum, is it? Well, that’s the best sort. Right—there we are.” Moody stopped walking and gestured with his cane towards the middle of the wide, deep cove, at the massive castle structure that was Culparrat. Penelope let out a breath of awe.

It rose from the sea, striking against the soft, grassy cliffs of the beach. It was smaller than Hogwarts and had none of that castle’s clean, majestic beauty. Culparrat was impressive in the way that merpeople were impressive—powerfully built, slicked with algae, not as beautiful as it should have been and twice as imposing as it had the right to be. It looked as if it had once been white, but Penelope knew that it had been underwater for centuries and it was water-stained now; green and black streaks marred the white stone and made it appear as an enormous, rotting tooth set in gums of black water, which swirled and licked at its barnacled base. An endless, eerie moan issued from its gaping windows and echoed against the hills that sheltered the cove.

“Are there really merghosts in there?” she whispered, not sure why she was suddenly so nervous. This sort of thing had never been her forte. She would have liked to hold Percy’s hand, to go in there—he never got scared of things like that.

“Sure,” said Moody matter-of-factly. “We keep having to expel them. The dungeon floods, and the merghosts... well, they think it’s a sort of joke, taking Stunned prisoners and setting them face down in the water. Turning them back over before they drown is mostly all there is for the trainees to do.”

“Trainees?”

“Aurors in training. Not a bad lot, very eager, but—well.”

“What?”

Moody scratched his head and appeared to be looking for a gentle way to put it. “Not the snappiest cards in the deck, are they?”

But it made Penelope feel better to know that there would be more people in that mad-looking castle than just herself and Moody. When they had made their way up the beach and across the water to its entrance, she was glad for the sight of young people in their official robes, guarding the castle doors and flanking the entrance hall.

“Elizabeth!” Penelope reached out her arms on instinct to hug a pretty Ravenclaw who had been three years her junior, and who now stood between her and the interior entrance doors.

Elizabeth did not smile or reach out; instead she pulled her wand in a flash and had disarmed Penelope within half a second. “Name?” she demanded. “Business?”

Penelope nearly fell back with surprise. She steadied herself. “Er... it’s Penny, El. Don’t you remember?”

Moody chuckled, just behind her. "She's doing her job. You could be disguised." He pointed to the wand. "It's fine, Miss Duzen. Good work, but we'll take that back now—she's with me. We'll go ahead through."

Elizabeth nodded curtly and handed Penelope her wand. She then muttered a password to the stone shark's head, which was mounted on the left side of the doors, and the doors swung open.

"Not the snappiest, are they?" Penelope whispered to Moody.

"Oh, there's one or two that make me proud. She'll pass her exam well before the rest of these duffers, I'll tell you that."

Penelope glanced over her shoulder to see that the doors were falling shut. Just before they did, Elizabeth peeked through the opening with a cheeky grin on her face and whispered, "Hi, Penny! Your hair looks great!"

The doors slammed. Moody made a sound of disgust that echoed in the wide, dark corridor. "Then again, I've been wrong. This way."

Penelope followed close, terrified of losing her guide. The walls were green-stained white marble, carved with strange fish and fanged octopi, and every bulging eye of every creature seemed to follow them as they walked.

"Well done finding the creepiest possible place," she muttered, and picked her way around a puddle. "Is that... seaweed on the ceiling?"

"You didn't see it hanging all over the turrets? We clean it out but it just comes back. Seems to be this place's equivalent of cobwebs. Prisoners're down here—now hang on."

Moody grabbed a torch from the wall and lit it, then led Penelope to the right, into a dank and narrow corridor that stunk of fish and spiraled down into the belly of the castle, pressing closer and darker with every step. She had the feeling that if she were to touch the walls, her fingers would come away covered with grime, and she decided not to test her theory. The narrow corridor emptied into a vast, flickering room where the marble had gone black all over, and the water was a foot deep. Penelope gasped at what she saw.

Hundreds upon hundreds of criminals—and innocents, she knew that some of them had to be—were here. Lying in rows, in cots too close together, not knowing how they invaded one another's personal space.

"Keeping 'em all in one spot until we can do something more effective," Moody growled. "Don't need to be running about trying to Stun them all in their own time. Easier to keep track this way. And then, when they're sorted and we've got a solid imprisonment charm, we'll shake 'em all out and make things more comfortable. After all—" Moody laughed darkly, "—some of them'll be here till they die."

Till they die. Penelope felt a rush of pity, followed very closely by one of terrific fury. She looked around the room at the silent men and women and wondered which of them had looked on as Percy had been tortured and killed.

It was too horrible a thought; her mind tried to repel it but Penelope stood still, staring at blank faces, as ice cold water seeped through her stockings. The frozen sea was getting into her shoes. It numbed her feet, but she could not move. Suddenly she found her voice.

"The most potent spells, on an Arithmantic scale, are all emotion-based," she heard herself say faintly. "We researched every major spell, and the thirty most powerful are variations on the same theme—each one operates on a highly personal level. No matter how the spell is crafted, no matter what words are chosen, or what quality of witch does the casting, no major spell can act without personal motivation on the part of an individual, or the collective emotional investment of a willing group. Expecto Patronum. Avada Kedavra. Amora Primus—and now Expecto Sacrificum. All the same basic requirement. The only one we found that doesn't work that way is Priori Incantatem; that's purely element based."

Moody watched her, eyebrows lifted, mad eye shivering in its socket and seeming to focus right through her brain. "Go on."

"What I want to try to do is amalgamate existing imprisonment and locking spells, then infuse them with the appropriate emotional complexity, in order to create the most powerful spell possible. Based on my notes, I think I know which spells I need, but I haven't been able to commingle them—they won't work as one spell. Not yet. There's something missing, something... I can't tell. I'll get that, I know it, it's right on the tip of my tongue. I just have to *think*." Penelope drew a deep breath; this was more talking than she'd done in an age and more emotion than she'd felt towards anything other than Leo since Percy's death. "But the *feeling* of it—that's going to take the most work, and I'll tell you, I really am looking forward to having Hermione Granger back."

Moody grinned. "From the Thinker. Yes, she'll be an asset."

"I think that between the two of us..." Penelope faltered slightly at the thought of bouncing her

ideas off of anyone but Percy, but she recovered herself and continued. "Arthur wants to hire her on to help me, and if she says yes, then we'll make quick work of this thing."

"I'm glad to hear it." Moody's expression was unreadable. He searched her face for a moment and then: "CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" he shouted, making Penelope shriek with surprise.

Across the chamber, two Aurors in training, who had been sleeping in chairs with their heads in their hands, leapt to their feet and sent twin looks of terror across the room. "Sorry!" they called in unison, and went sloshing back to their posts.

Moody growled and turned away. "Sorry," he spat, leading the way out of the prisoners' terrible waiting room. "Sorry? I'll tell you when they'll be sorry. When they're facing down the wrong end of a wand, that's when. And where'll their sorries get them at that moment? Six feet under, that's where."

Moody's wasted reprimands reverberated from the damp walls until they were out in the main corridor, and Penelope found that she had to repress a snicker. He was a funny old man, when he was annoyed. She wondered if he knew that, and thought it better not to ask.

"Thank you for the tour," said Penelope, holding out her hand to Moody, who looked surprised, but pleased. It had been the right decision, coming here. Her mind was much clearer, and she wanted nothing more now than to get back home and start *working*. She had to get everything in order for Hermione's return. She didn't want to waste any more time, and silently cursed herself for being so slack up until now.

"I'll walk you out," said Moody, offering his arm. Penelope was just about to take it, when someone called out from behind her.

"Penny! What are you doing here?" said a familiar voice.

"Where's Leo?" said another, and Penelope turned to see Cho Chang and Charlie standing just inside the entrance hall.

"How'd you get in here?" Moody growled, drawing his wand.

"He's with your mum," Penelope said, noticing with concern that both Cho's and Charlie's clothes were soaked. Cho shivered, and Charlie removed his cloak and made a motion to put it around her shoulders, despite her murmur of protest. "You're wet, too," she said, and before he could say anything, Cho grabbed one end and threw it over both their shoulders.

"Answer my question or I'll blast you both to the other side of the country." Moody took a step closer and fixed his real eye on the pair. The other appeared to be trying to focus on the newspaper in Charlie's hand.

"Please, sir." One of the Aurors-in-training, a mousy-haired man around Penelope's age, stepped into view from the doorway. Penelope could see Elizabeth behind him, peeking through a slit in the doorway. "Their identification is positive and they're not on the restricted list."

"They're not approved either!" exclaimed Moody, and flicked his wand in the man's direction. Elizabeth's face disappeared from the crack in the door, just in time to miss a jet of red sparks, which narrowly missed the young Auror's head, although Penelope could smell a faint tinge of burnt hair in the air.

Penelope had to give the man, whom she now recognized as a Hufflepuff three years her senior, credit. He didn't run, but remained standing in front of them. "Please, sir," he repeated, "They're on the map." He pulled a piece of parchment from his pocket and handed it to Moody. Penelope could have sworn she saw a grin pass across the old Auror's face, but all he said was, "Hmph," and then, "Dismissed," and the Auror went back outside, but not before drawing his wand and muttering some sort of password.

"Black's idea," said Moody, examining the parchment, on which, Penelope could see some sort of floor plan. "We're still testing it, but it seems to work. If you know the password, you can use this map to see who's in every room in this castle. Unfortunately, it doesn't enable us to track people down if they should happen to escape. Still, it sees through Invisibility Cloaks and Polyjuice Potion, and, according to the map, you two are who you say you are."

Moody's eye wobbled in its socket to rest once again on the copy of the *Daily Prophet* in Charlie's hand. "So, you're here," he grunted. "Is there a good reason? You both look a mess."

"Everyone's okay," said Charlie, "despite what this so-called journalist claims. I don't know how he got past the barriers to make any sort of a report, but there is some truth to what he says."

Charlie handed the newspaper to Moody, who unfolded it to the front page. A flash of light caught Penelope's eye and she leaned in to see that the photograph that covered most of the front page was a rare color one and it appeared to be of a large jet of fire from a dragon. The flame was so powerful that it managed to break through its photograph border and light up the words in the headline above.

**QUIDDITCH CHAMPION VIKTOR KRUM NARROWLY ESCAPES DEATH:
Has the Ministry of Magic gone too far?**

Story by N. Flummery

Photo by: Crispin R. Peltier

Penelope smirked. It was the same photographer who'd taken the pictures of Harry and Ginny for *Charmed Life*.

"Go ahead," said Charlie, "read it out loud. I want to make sure that the text hasn't already changed. I've never seen the *Prophet* get out news in such a timely manner."

Moody cleared his voice to read, but ended up coughing instead. Penelope took the paper from him, and began,

Early this morning, at 4:12 a.m., an incident of grave danger occurred at Azkaban. It seems that the dragons in use by the Permanent Azkaban Patrol to control rogue Dementors at the former prison may not be as effective as originally claimed. Many expressed doubt when Acting Minister of Magic Arthur Weasley employed a team of dragon riders led by none other than his own son Chad and family friend, Michelle O'Malley.

"He let his own children run wild—they couldn't keep gnomes out of their garden, how do they expect to keep Dementors in Azkaban?" reported a neighbor of the Weasleys who asked not to be identified.

"I know who that is," said Charlie. "We don't have any close wizarding neighbors. That's my friend Dave's mum. Hit her in the head with a gnome once when he was over during the summer holiday. She never forgave me." Cho patted Charlie's arm sympathetically, and Penny continued reading.

Evidence that the dragon scheme was not working according to plan apparently came just before Halloween, when a group of Dementors rushed towards a dragon ridden by none other than Harry Potter. The other riders eventually pushed the Dementors away, and the incident was kept quiet. The official report states that Potter's dragon, Norbert, was suffering from a minor head cold.

"That true?" Moody asked. "Do you really think it was a cold?"

"Yes," said Charlie. "Mick looked him over and he's been fine ever since. I never heard of a dragon cold that lasted only one day, but then, this is the first time we've ever put dragons in this particular situation, so who knows what could happen? Go on, Penny—you haven't come to the good bits yet."

It must have been something more dramatic than a cold that caused Bevan, Krum's Welsh Green, to act up early this morning. The three nightshift riders, Chad Weasley, Chong Chung, and World Champion Viktor Krum had already been on duty for six hours when Krum's dragon started to act as one might expect an enormous Class XXXXX creature to act. Several keepers noticed that Krum, who was flying on the side of the castle closest to the dragon hangars, seemed to be having trouble controlling the beast.

The dragon began to breathe large plumes of fire, something the animals are supposedly trained not to do at Azkaban. Weasley, who was able to see what was happening, flew towards Krum on his dragon, and several keepers also approached Krum on broomsticks. Chung managed to control the Dementors on the far side of the island alone. Even Dementors, it seems, like to sleep at 3am.

"Where the hell were the Aurors?" boomed Moody. "They're supposed to be there to help in case something like this happens."

"They were there," said Cho. "Don't worry. They helped. He just didn't mention it. But it is true that the Dementors pretty much stayed inside the whole time. The Aurors didn't have to use a Patronus at all."

Several keepers tried to get close enough to help Krum climb off of the dragon, but the dragon began to fly up and down in an erratic fashion, blowing fire so hot that it was impossible to get close. One of the reserve flyers had been contacted by this time, an experienced war flyer named Lisa Morgan, and she flew to the scene with a dragon, intent on trying to control Bevan.

Both Weasley and Morgan were unsuccessful, and Krum climbed out of his harness and made a move for his broom, once it became clear that he must either evacuate or die by

fire. It was only when Draco Malfoy, a rider on the morning shift, arrived early for work that the situation took a turn for the better. Malfoy's Chinese Fireball, Mordor, seemed able to succeed where the Welsh Greens had failed. He managed to control Bevan enough to lead him to land, although not before the dragon bucked once and sent Krum plummeting towards the depths of the sea below.

Krum, who is a World Champion Quidditch player, was unable to grab his broom in time. He most certainly would have died, had Malfoy not uttered a well-formed Levitation Charm at the last minute. Weasley was able to pick up Krum on his dragon, and they both flew to safety.

Shaken, but unharmed physically (except for the loss of his eyebrows), Krum claims that he is well enough to fly his next shift, which begins this evening at 8pm. It's a good thing. We're not sure who else would be crazy enough to take the job. If Arthur Weasley would like to retain his position as Minister when the Reconstruction officially ends next June, then he might want to reevaluate his decision to keep things in the family.

"Oh Charlie! Cho!" Penelope handed the *Daily Prophet* back to Moody and rushed forward to hug them both. Realizing that they were still damp, and Cho was shivering despite the heavy cloak, Penelope pulled her wand and sent a drying charm in their direction.

"Thanks!" said Cho, laughing. "I can't believe we didn't think of that."

"You're tired," said Penelope. "Moody, is there anywhere in here to sit down, and perhaps to get a cup of tea?"

Moody led them back down the hall to the Auror's lounge, which was sparsely furnished, but by far the most livable room they had yet entered. He sent three young trainees running and motioned to Penelope, Charlie and Cho to sit in the vacated chairs, while he perched himself against a table, using his cane for support. Before sitting, Penelope searched the room for a teapot and teacups, and quickly whipped up a few cups of tea for them.

"How's Krum's dragon now?" asked Moody, finishing his tea in one gulp. Cho cradled hers between her hands, still trying to warm up, and Charlie threw the cloak over her shoulders once more.

Charlie shrugged. "He seems fine. Mick checked him out before he started his shift, and Bevan is acting like nothing happened. He ate all his food, drank all his water, and as far as I know, is taking a nap."

"And you've no idea what might have caused him to act that way?"

"None. He seems a bit more tired than usual, but other than that, everything checked out normal."

"You don't think the Dementors are affecting them somehow, do you?"

This time, Cho shook her head and spoke up. "The Dementors seem to have been growing more passive over the past few weeks. They've been staying near or inside the castle, except for the time they rushed at Harry. There weren't even any Dementors *near* Viktor last night. We'd only seen two the entire shift, and they were on my side of Azkaban."

Moody didn't look like this information made him any happier. "Do you think they could be plotting anything? Planning any sort of grand takeover?"

"That would be unprecedented," said Penelope. "I've done a lot of research on the Dementors. Percy and I studied them early on when Fudge was trying to find a way to control them. Although they work together as a group, they tend to go where they're told. They've never *started* anything before, although I don't know if they've ever been this hungry before. They were never even heard of until about eight-hundred years ago, when a Turkish wizard named Hunderbab united them to help his Muggle soldiers in war. Before that, there's no account, and many suspect that this Hunderbab actually created them, using some sort of mutation potion combining Muggle corpses and the Lethifold. There's some inconsistency in that theory, since the first written account of the Lethifold isn't until about two hundred years ago, but it's highly likely that they or similar creatures existed before then."

No one said anything for a moment.

"We need to monitor Azkaban more closely, just in case," said Moody. "I can assign some of these young Aurors to the task—they could use a long, boring job to teach them a little endurance."

"I don't know how much more we can patrol," said Charlie, sounding defensive. "We've got twenty-four hour supervision of the perimeter—three dragons, three riders, and a host of keepers and Aurors at any given time."

Moody banged his cane on the floor. "Stop your whinging, boy. I know you've had a long night. I'm talking about monitoring *inside* Azkaban. We need a way to figure out what they're doing when

we can't see them."

"We can't go in there!" objected Charlie. "You saw it yourself when you pulled the last prisoners out. The place is falling apart. Besides, if any human tried to waltz in there and have a look around now, they'd be spit right back out again without a soul. Those Dementors are starving."

Moody ignored Charlie. "We need to see if they're plotting anything. Are they sleeping? Are they agitated? Are they communicating at all? Have they started Kissing each other? Maybe Black can work on a map of Azkaban like the one he made for us at Culparrat... though it would be a strain on him."

Charlie threw up his hands in annoyance and Penelope shook her head. "I don't think it's a good idea to give Sirius an excuse to go to Azkaban. He's obsessed with the idea of getting rid of the Dementors. We spoke quite a bit at Halloween, and... well—" Penelope searched for a tactful way to state her feelings "- he was very... *intense*."

Chuckling, Moody nodded his head in agreement. "True that," he said. "Do you have a better idea, Miss Chung?"

Charlie snorted and Cho elbowed him in the ribs. "Oi!" said Charlie. "Don't get your knickers in a twist. It is funny."

At the mention of the word 'knickers', Penelope caught Cho's eye, and both of them smiled, apparently coming to the same realization at once.

"Do you think it would work?" asked Cho.

"I don't know," said Penelope. "We'd have to give it a bit more power, but it might."

"Maybe it only works in locker rooms and toilets," said Cho. "I never thought of trying it anywhere else, especially not outside Hogwarts."

"Don't forget about dormitories," said Penelope, and both girls erupted into laughter.

The two men looked at each other in confusion. Penelope sighed. "I'm about to divulge a great Ravenclaw secret to both of you Gryffindor men. I only do this in the name of wizarding security."

"You must both promise, no, *swear* not to leak the intricate nature of this charm to anyone," said Cho, her voice solemn.

"Great things have come from Ravenclaw," said Moody. "I promise."

"Well," began Penelope, standing. "I think it might just be better to give a demonstration. Give us a second." She motioned to Cho to join her in the corner, and the two girls devised their plan. Penelope closed her eyes and concentrated as hard as she could on a room she had never seen before in the Culparrat castle—the basement dungeons, where the merghosts lived. When she had formed an image of what she thought it looked like, she opened her eyes and nodded at Cho, who drew her wand and loudly spoke the words to the charm. For a moment, nothing happened, and then, an image appeared on the opposite wall, blurry at first, but growing clearer every second.

It was a darkened room—the seaweed on the ceiling was much thicker and darker than that on the upper levels. The water was very deep and there was only a thin band of dryness that ran around the top of the walls. Pale, silvery figures floated through the columns that supported the dungeon ceiling, sometimes passing right through each other.

"That's the dungeon..." said Moody, the awe in his voice evident. "But how—"

The image faded, and then disappeared.

"Sorry," said Penelope. "I'm a bit out of practice. Haven't had the urge to spy on anyone lately. Although come to think of it, this charm might be useful for when Leo gets a bit older."

"What do you mean, spy?" asked Charlie.

Cho took a deep breath and said, "I guess our reputations will be ruined. This is an old spell that's handed down to each female Ravenclaw class. I don't know when it started, but if you're in Ravenclaw, then you know how to do it. It takes a while to learn."

Penelope continued, "It's a Peeping Charm, at least, that's what we called it. The brilliant thing is that you don't have to be anywhere near the target—you could spy on someone in Gryffindor Tower from the Forbidden Forest if you wanted—and you don't have to ever have seen the place you're spying on. You just have to know where it is and imagine it."

"How is that possible?" asked Charlie, looking a bit red. "Wouldn't you have to charm the room as well?"

He had a right to be nervous, thought Penelope, wondering how many Ravenclaw girls who were at Hogwarts with her brother-in-law had spied him in the Quidditch locker room. She herself had managed to catch Percy in the Prefect's Bathroom one evening—reading in the tub—and she knew that Cho had used the charm under the pretense of trying to figure out Hufflepuff's Quidditch plans, and had seemed disappointed when all that had happened had been that she'd actually seen the diagrams and not their star Seeker.

Shaking her head, Penelope explained. "That's the brilliance of it. You don't have to have seen the room. You just have to know where it is. It's like your mind finds it, and is able to place the charm from afar. The only problem is that we've only ever used it for short periods of time. You can see," she pointed to the blank wall, "the image disappears after a few seconds."

Cho's eyes were bright with determination. "I'm sure we could figure it out," she said. "We could set up a permanent monitoring station and it doesn't have to be at Azkaban. It can be here, or at the Ministry, or anywhere!"

"We've got floor plans of Azkaban," said Moody. "You think we could fix that charm so that it would continuously rotate through all of them? And stop in one place if we needed it to?"

"We'd have to train each of the Aurors to concentrate," said Penelope. "But Elizabeth, for instance, was in Ravenclaw, so she'd be easier to train than the others."

"Wait a second," said Charlie, standing up. "You mean to tell me that only Ravenclaws will be able to operate the spell? If you're going to make modifications, then you might as well make it so that anyone can use it. It can't be that hard!"

Cho crossed her arms. "It can't?" she asked, sounding sweet but looking fierce.

He laughed. "Let me try." Closing his eyes, he said, "I'm thinking of a room. Say your spell, or whatever."

"All right." Cho pointed her wand at Charlie and said the incantation. Charlie opened his eyes and stared expectantly at the wall in front of him. It was blank. "Must not have been trying hard enough," he muttered. "Do it again," he said to Cho, screwing his eyes shut. Penelope stifled a giggle. This time, something did appear on the wall. A dark patch that resembled an ink spill.

Moody guffawed and clapped Charlie on the back. "Better luck next time," he said.

"I'm just tired," Charlie mumbled to no one in particular, slumping into the nearest chair. "How soon can you fix that thing up to work?"

"We-ell," said Penelope, biting her lip. "Not too long. Would it be possible to borrow Cho for a few days? Would that be okay?" She addressed Cho, who nodded her head.

Charlie shrugged. "Why not? We'll get one of the reserves to fly your shift, Cho. And who knows, maybe we'll have some new applicants. I'm sure everyone's really eager to fly with Viktor Krum. Thrill seekers and lunatics from around the country'll be breaking down our doors."

"There you are," said Moody, patting Penelope on the back. "It looks like you've got something to keep you occupied until Miss Granger's return. I'll be expecting a prototype soon. And as for you—" Moody pointed a gnarled finger at Charlie. "Keep a close eye on those dragons. I don't care how well they seem, something's not right, and I don't like it. I don't like it at all."

* * * * *

December 10

Dear Ginny,

Nasty weather today, but that's all right. When the Secretary Privy came out last week and saw us flying in the sleet without protection, she had a fit, and now the dragons have had tent things attached to their harnesses. They look sketchy—just bits of tarp on four poles, really—but mine keeps me dry and I still have peripheral vision, so I'm not complaining. Norbert doesn't seem too keen on it, but then, he's been edgy for the last few days, ever since what happened to Viktor. Hope I don't get thrown too, ho ho. Don't worry, don't worry, don't worry. I won't fall. And even if I do, I'm a good swimmer, but don't look like that. It's not going to happen.

You should see Malfoy under his tent. He thinks he's a maharajah. I notice Mordor—that's his dragon—is the only one that never gets sick or nervous, and I can't help wondering why. (Don't tell Ron about that, because it'll just give him more fuel for the fire.) Malfoy says his dragon's just better quality and that you get what you pay for, with animals, but that's crap. Norbert came free and he's the strongest dragon out here, because Hagrid was good to him, and then Charlie was. I do feel a bit badly for Malfoy, though. He looks bored. Mick and I talk back and forth, but Malfoy never says a word. And when it's quiet out here, Mick reads creature handbooks and I write to you. I never see Malfoy doing anything. I still don't get why he's out here. If he were anyone else, I'd say he just couldn't stand to be idle while everyone else was rebuilding, but Malfoy? No.

I walked by Lupin Lodge last night. Just to stretch my legs after work, you know. Saw you through the dining room window, it looked like you were doing some homework. Studying? Practicing? What are you doing now? I want to say I hope it's going at top speed, but you know I don't want you to hurt yourself. It was good to see you, even if we didn't

*get to talk. I don't know how you get anything done when your hair's in your face like that.
I miss you.
Love,
Harry*

*

December 11

Dear Harry,

Don't joke! Don't fall. Do you think you should be writing up there? I'd miss your letters if you stopped, of course, but I'd rather have you in one piece. And don't bother feeling sorry for Malfoy. I hope you haven't forgotten that he's a prize git, even if he hasn't caused any proper mischief in awhile. Keep your eyes on him and keep your wand-hand ready.

I sound like Professor Moody! Perhaps I'll stop studying Healing, and ask McGonagall if she'll let me teach Defense. Can't you just see that? Or you could teach it, Harry, and scare the first years to death with stories. Or we could switch off—I'll do a year and then you can have it. I'm sure the position's going to be cursed like that forever—no one can do more than one turn in that job.

My studies are coming along though, and quickly. I think you know I worked on Ron, a bit, and Remus says it's all right for me to keep working with people a little at a time, as long as their emotional wounds aren't too dire. The only problem is that everyone's so stricken, since the war, that there's no one safe to work on. I don't know who I could possibly help without hurting myself, but I think that just living in the same house with Sirius and Remus is making me stronger all the time. I don't open up to them, or try to help them, but I can still feel their old experiences, to some extent. I have to find ways to propel my own energy out around me, to hold their auras back. It's good practice, because they've both got pasts that... well. You know.

But about you and me in particular, which you won't ask about but I have to tell you anyway—I finally found another book on Healing—"Open Hands" by Namita Vibhushan. She was born in the 1700s and was India's only Healer for nearly two centuries. It's a very short book, but it's a personal account, and it's so nice to finally know about someone else's experience with empathic magic. She talks about everything—about how tiring it was at first, about how long it took her to handle human feeling with any success, and about how she dealt with Jivukti Kanesh, who was her-partner, sort of. Well. He was her lover. Anyway, it's a helpful book. You can read it if you want.

I'm glad there are tents on the dragons. It's much nicer weather today, though—crisp and cool, my favorite. Ron mentioned that you two are going to see the Cannons play the Kestrels tonight—have fun! I'll be listening on the wireless to make sure Ron doesn't do anything stupid, like throw himself onto the pitch.

Oooh. Remus just slapped a bit of parchment in front of me with a lot of red ink on it. Let me see... yes, it's my Potions midterm. "How is it possible to flawlessly brew the most difficult potion on record, yet very nearly fail my test?" he just said. He would also like me to know that if I can't find as much time to study for my N.E.W.T.s as I find to write to you, then I might find myself unemployed in seven months' time.

He is looking at me in a way that says I should put down this quill. Bye.

*Love,
Ginny*

Harry stuffed the letter into the pocket of his cloak, where it crumpled against the others he carried around with him, and wrapped his cold hands around the steaming butterbeer that Ron had just shoved under his nose.

"Reading?" Ron asked innocently, thudding into his seat.

"Shut up," was Harry's eloquent reply. He propped his feet on the seat in front of him and surveyed the pitch.

It was the second Cannons game he'd come to. He hadn't expected to have so much fun at the first one, but there was nothing quite like sitting next to Ron when the Chudley Cannons won a match. Ron became a shouting blur of orange flag and ginger hair and wild, flailing arms; Harry imagined that even Oliver was less excited by the team's undefeated status.

"Undefeated," Ron was saying now, thumping his own feet onto the seat before him and slapping his knee with his free hand. "Unde-bloody-feated. But then, I always knew."

"Top marks for Divination."

Ron laughed, and swigged his butterbeer. "I *made* top marks in Divination. I've got the Inner Eye, Potter, and don't you forget it."

"Right," Harry answered mildly, and sniffed his own butterbeer. He didn't drink it. Just now it was a perfect hand-heater. It was winter now, darkness was falling, and the wind in the stands cut across the crowd like a frozen knife. Most of the fans on this side of the stadium were bundled up in shocking orange blankets and fuzzy orange hats. Those who weren't were shivering madly. "Let's make predictions then."

Ron made a happy sound, and sat up straighter. "That was always good fun," he agreed. "All right—when I'm a hundred and eighty seven, I'll be slaughtered by a falling comet."

"Er—a falling comet would take out half the world, wouldn't it?"

"You're stalling."

Harry grinned. "Okay... I'll get thrown into the Atlantic next week, and catch pneumonia by Christmas."

"Not a chance," Ron said staunchly. "None of that. If you want to get thrown, let's have it be from a Firebolt at a professional Quidditch match, because you're going out for another team when this madness with dragons is done, Harry." Ron nudged him. "Aren't you?"

Harry shrugged. "Dunno. But if I do, I predict I'll be killed by a hailstorm of enchanted Bludgers."

"Oh, nice one. How about this, then—I'll be captured and tortured and eaten alive by a band of ferocious veela!"

"Hermione'd kill you first. Oh, I've got one—" Harry sniggered. "I predict that I'll be doing some silencing charms on your room, when Hermione comes home."

Ron went scarlet. "Very funny, ha HA," he muttered. "I'm sure I could make the same prediction, but I don't want to think about you in a dark room with my *sister*."

Harry sputtered, and sprayed the foam of his butterbeer all over the fat neck of the squat man in front of him. "Sorry," he said quickly, when the man turned around looking irritated.

The irritation faded in an instant. "Are you—?" asked the man, his round, bald head flushing red above the black fringe of his hair as his gaze fixed on Harry's forehead. "You are! Harry Potter! And you must be—" his small, black eyes darted to Ron. "Ron Weasley, is it?"

"Yeah." Ron sounded like he wanted to be modest and withdrawn, but Harry knew better. This sort of thing made Ron walk on air for weeks on end, and he envied his friend that excitement. Other people seemed to get such a rush out of fame. He felt like he'd been cheated out of the fun parts.

"What an honor this is!" cheeped the man, his fleshy cheeks dimpling as he smiled. He clapped the ends of his orange blanket together. "Oh, tell me, lads. Would you sign a scrap of parchment for an old bloke?"

"Sure," said Ron. "What's your name?"

"It's Flicket Gladrag," said the man, handing over a quill and small scroll.

Harry peered at the man for a moment, while Ron signed his name. "Gladrag?" he repeated. "Like the wizardwear?"

"The very one! You've heard of it!" Mr. Gladrag beamed. "Own any of my line?" he asked hopefully.

"Heard of it?" Ron repeated, passing the scroll to Harry and looking up. "Who hasn't heard of it? That's *yours*?"

Mr. Gladrag nodded. "All mine."

For the first time, Harry noticed the beautiful, black-haired woman who sat beside Mr. Gladrag. She had to be a foot taller, four stone lighter, and fifty years younger than he was, and yet her diamond-encrusted left hand caressed the old tycoon's knee. Harry hid a smirk and bent his head to sign his name, thinking again of how odd fame and fortune really were.

He looked at the scroll and barely bit back a laugh. "*Dear Flicket, Good to meet you! Yours truly, Ron Weasley*" The "Weasley" had more curlicues than Harry had ever seen in it. He didn't know where Ron got that stuff. "*Harry Potter*" he signed quickly, and handed it all back to Mr. Gladrag.

"You two boys ought to be wearing the best of the best," Mr. Gladrag was saying to Ron. "Being who you are, it only makes sense. Or perhaps you'd like something for your young lady?" His eyes darted to Harry. "Hermione Granger, isn't it?"

Harry glanced at Ron. "She's our friend, yes."

"Yes, your *friend*, tee hee, don't I know about *that*. Well, I've seen her picture, and she'd do well in a little red thing or two we've got in stock this season."

Ron's fists clenched, but before he could do anything, Mr. Gladrag's eyes went wide and he wagged a finger at Harry.

"Oh ho, no, that's right, you've got the other one! The Minister's little girl—I saw that edition of *Charmed Life* magazine, and my, my, Mr. Potter! Yes, you'll certainly want to dress *her* up for the smart parties. Lovely figure."

Ron made a strangled noise, and Harry's blood burned. He had a vision of himself yanking the last dregs of hair out of Mr. Gladrag's head.

"Here's my card—and no cost to you, of course." Still beaming, and obviously oblivious to having caused any offense, Mr. Gladrag handed a card to Harry and one to Ron, who barely took it. "Good for business, people like yourselves showing up in Gladrags! And you've no idea what these autographs mean to me." He sighed, and touched the little scroll to his orange-jumpered chest. "It'd be an honor to give something back to the people who—ah well. You know what you've done. Just grateful, that's all." He gave them each a humble look, and Harry felt suddenly much less violent.

They were all quiet for a moment, and then:

"You want to give them to us free?" Ron asked. "Dress robes?"

Mr. Gladrag chuckled. "For yourself, for the ladies—just call." He stretched a short, pudgy arm around his companion's slim back. It barely reached. "And now lads, back to the pitch. Game'll be on soon, and I haven't missed a Cannons game in nearly forty years."

Ron's eyebrows shot up. "He must be all right," he whispered to Harry, when Mr. Gladrag was safely involved with the black-haired woman beside him, and no longer listening to them. "He's a Cannons man. And he's giving us free stuff. To think, my season tickets are right behind his—and it was nice of him to ask for our autographs and everything." Ron cleared his throat and tried to look casual.

Harry shrugged. "He didn't notice us last time."

"You didn't spit butterbeer all over him last time. Look!" Ron had forgot Flicket Gladrag. He pointed to the pitch, mouth hanging open, eyes saucer-wide, as if he'd never seen the Cannons come out of the tunnel before. They weren't even in full gear, Harry noted. But then, they were still warming up, and so were the Kestrels, whose leprechaun mascots had not yet begun to wreak havoc. Ron had insisted on getting there an hour early to watch everything.

Harry checked his watch. Five-thirty. Half an hour until the game began. He lifted his butterbeer to his mouth.

CRACK!

Harry was on his feet in an instant and so was Ron, both of them straining their necks to see what was happening on the pitch. A Bludger zoomed away from Maureen Knight, who slumped, dropped from her broom and tumbled towards the ground. The sparse crowd of Cannons fans who had arrived early all shot to their feet and gasped, and even the opposing Kestrel fans stopped playing their harps long enough to look horrified.

"*Lentes!*" cried Oliver Wood, pointing his wand and rushing towards her.

To Harry's relief, Knight's body slowed down considerably and hit the grass with a *thud* that didn't sound too painful. But she lay there, deathly still, with her nose gushing blood and her arms and legs at odd angles, and Harry had a feeling that the Bludger injury was as bad as it had sounded. Above her, the Kestrels' team captain and first Beater hovered close together. Harry thought he had just seen them grin at each other.

"Get out of the way," Oliver shouted at the mediwizards who had gathered around the unconscious Seeker. "Give her room—"

"Mr. Wood, back away—*away*, I said! We are trained professionals," said one of the witches in white. Still, it took two referees to hold Oliver away from Knight, whose prone body was by now surrounded by a crowd so dense that Harry couldn't see through it. They examined her for a long time, as an uneasy murmur rippled through the crowd.

"She can't be out," Gladrag muttered, in front of them. "She *can't* be out. She's our good luck charm. Come on, love. Pick yourself up."

"Pick yourself *up*," Ron repeated. He gripped Harry's shoulder. "She has to play," he said mechanically. "She has to play."

The mediwizards ended their conference and stood around Knight's body. Two of them floated her into the air and towards the tunnel. As they disappeared along with Knight, two other mediwizards approached the referee and officials. They were a long time talking and then the referee tapped his throat with his wand.

"*Sonorous*. All right, ladies and gentlemen. Maureen Knight has experienced damage to her cranium and to her neck, and must recover fully before she plays another game—which won't be tonight."

There was an outcry on the Cannons side—fans shouted and swore and threw their butterbeer

cups at the field. The Kestrels fans cheered and swept their hands across their harps, while their leprechauns let out high pitched noises of glee and shot skyrockets of clover into the stands.

Ron moaned, dropped into his seat and put his head in his hands, and Harry sat down next to him, not sure whether to laugh or vomit. After all, it wasn't the end of the world. It was only the Chudley Cannons.

But he had signed a contract.

Harry swallowed the swarm of butterflies that fought to get out of his stomach.

"Oliver Wood, you have one half hour to prepare your reserve player and your team," the referee continued. "Play will begin with a penalty shot on the Kestrels for the deliberate disabling of an opposing player."

"WHAT?" shouted Kyle Kirkpatrick, the Kestrels' captain. He pushed sandy hair out of his eyes and glared at the referee. "But that was just bad luck! You're not allowed to—That's a load of—"

But his curses were lost on the small man in striped robes, who had tapped his throat again and walked away. Looking hostile but confident, Kirkpatrick returned to his team and gathered them into an airborne huddle.

Oliver, on the other hand, didn't do anything. He stood on the pitch, staring towards the tunnel into which Knight had just been taken, looking very lost. Even when Cole Kerry flew down and tapped his shoulder, he didn't seem to remember where he was.

"I'd better go down there and see if... if Oliver needs me," Harry managed, standing up and edging past Ron to the aisle, holding his stomach with one hand to stop it from jumping around.

"You can't do anything," Ron moaned without looking up. "He has to put in his reserve. And it was such a beautiful season."

"I'm second reserve." Harry had said it so faintly that he wasn't sure Ron would hear it. He was wrong. Ron was on his feet, holding him by the collar, before he could take a step towards the pitch.

"You're... *what*?" Ron whispered. He shook Harry a little. "What did you just say?"

"I'm second reserve. Oliver made me sign it. I only said yes because I didn't imagine it would ever—and I'm sure it won't. I haven't been working out with the team. And he'd put in his first reserve anyway, I'm sure that's the rule."

Ron's eyes had nearly fallen out of his head. He tightened his grip on Harry's collar so that Harry had to fight for air. "You didn't tell me that," Ron hissed. "And there's no rule—don't you even know the—*damn* it—Wood can put in any player he wants! This happened before play commenced, understand—*before play commenced*—so he can make a substitution." Ron shook Harry again. "*Any* legal substitution." Ron looked a little scary now. "That could mean you."

"Let go," Harry rasped, and yanked at Ron's wrists.

Ron didn't seem to notice that Harry was asphyxiating. "You get down there," he commanded. "Get down there *now*." He pushed Harry in the direction of the pitch.

Harry fled, rubbing his neck and wondering if there was some sort of charm Hermione could do, when she got home, to make Ron a little less obsessive. When he got to the edge of the pitch, a burly official strode towards him, wand out.

"Get away from the sideline."

"But I'm—"

"You can't be down here, kid, get back to your seat."

Harry bristled. "Look, I'm the second reserve for the Cannons—"

The official snorted and his moustache flapped, making him look a little too much like Uncle Vernon for Harry's tastes. "Sure you are." He eyed the butterbeer in Harry's hand. "Just thought you'd pop by and play, eh? Get back to your seat." And when Harry didn't move, the official tried to grab his arm.

Harry took a sharp step back. "My name's Harry Potter," he said through clenched teeth, and for the first time in his life he felt satisfied to see someone's mouth drop open. "And I'd like to speak to Oliver Wood."

The official seemed unable to think up a reply. His moustache quivered and he opened the gate that separated the pitch from the stands. "G-go ahead," he stammered. "Sorry about that, but I didn't recognize—"

"S'all right," Harry muttered, and strode past him onto the pitch. Oliver was still standing, looking dazed, surrounded now by all his players and reserves, and Harry slipped into place behind Marty Gudgeon without anyone seeming to notice. Among the Cannons was a trembling man about his own size that Harry didn't recognize.

"Oliver, are you going to play?" asked Michaela Pummelfront in a low voice. "We've only got twenty-five minutes. Are you going to suit up, or should one of us?"

"He'll suit up," said Firoza Newland. "Look, Oliver, it'll be fine. We can play without Maureen. We've got Ross, after all."

Oliver made a devastated noise. He didn't seem to be focused on anything. "If we had more time..." he mumbled. "Perhaps if I called the time out *now* and bought two hours--"

"She's not going to recover in two hours," Cole Kerry said gently. "Come on, Oliver, put Ross on the pitch, he's worked out as hard as the rest of us."

"I..." Oliver swung around to look at the slender, trembling man, who Harry now realized must be the first reserve Seeker. "Right," he said, sounding more like himself. He smiled weakly. "Go on, Doylan. Suit up."

Ross Doylan made a noise very like the one Oliver had just made, and slunk away towards the tunnel.

When Ross was gone, Oliver slumped again and let out a cry. "Undefeated," was all he said.

Marty Gudgeon, who had been standing alongside him with a frown on his pug-like face, now glared at Oliver and punched him hard in the arm. "We need a CAPTAIN, man!" he roared. "SNAP OUT OF IT! You want to be undefeated? You'd better take the next twenty minutes and do something about it!"

Oliver stared at him, then focused over Marty's shoulder, at Harry. "Potter?" he asked faintly, looking like a man in a dream.

The team whirled around as one body, and face after face cracked into wide grins at the sight of Harry standing there.

"Harry! Mate, too good to see you!" Firoza reached out and clapped him on the shoulder.

"We're in a state, aren't we?" added Paul Wyeth.

"How'd you get on the pitch?" Medusa Francis asked, laughing and smacking her bat against her open palm. "Hex someone?"

"QUIET!" Oliver bellowed. The manic gleam had returned to his eyes, his mouth hung open, and he shook his head. "I can put you in, Potter," he breathed, sounding very much like Ron. There was a shocked, excited murmur from everyone, but Oliver silenced them again. "He's second reserve," he explained shortly. "But I promised he'd never have to play if he didn't want to--or unless there was a dire emergency."

"This is a dire emergency!" Cole Kerry piped up, hugging her broom. "And you want to play, don't you, Harry?" The whole team grinned at him and nodded.

Harry fidgeted. "You've got a first reserve, Oliver. I'm sure he'll want to--"

"I don't." Ross Doylan had returned, all in orange, looking terrified. "I'm not nearly good enough, and everyone knows it. I've worked hard--" he shot a frightened look at Oliver. "But I'm no Maureen Knight, and I'd rather we didn't lose the undefeated status. I know you're the better player, I saw you in tryouts."

"You were at tryouts?" Harry asked. He couldn't remember.

"I was cut in the third week," Ross said. "Please say you're playing."

Harry didn't know what to do. "But I haven't practiced," he said slowly. "I haven't worked out with all of you, I don't know the plays, I haven't been following Kestrel, I'm not up to speed, this isn't... this isn't school."

"You're damn right it's not." Oliver laughed harshly. "But you're a natural, Potter, you're a *natural*."

"And you've been flying every day, haven't you?" asked Firoza. "Up at Azkaban?"

"Yes, and I imagine that's even more difficult in some ways," added Paul.

Harry thought of the Dementors, and gave a dry laugh. But Paul was right—he *did* fly all day, and was often called on to dive and pull off complicated maneuvers... still, dragon riding wasn't like Quidditch. "I do," he finally answered, "but it's not the same thing--"

"Oh, come on--give it a go," Cole pleaded.

"It'll be great to have you with us again," Medusa said.

"Do it, Potter. Come on," Marty said, elbowing him in the side. "You know you want to."

"Make your choice," said Oliver, "but you've got to make it now." He gave Harry a pleading look.

Harry looked around at their faces, then up into the stands, where Ron, both hands gripping his hair, was standing beside Mr. Gladrag and staring down at their huddle. Harry swallowed and glanced out at the pitch, which shone green under the floodlamps. A bolt of terrified excitement shot through him. It was dark now, and the Snitch would be near-impossible to see—he knew nothing of the Kestrels' strategies, or even of how the Cannons' had developed since summer workouts. He hadn't even played a scrimmage game in three months.

His fingers itched for his Firebolt.

"Okay," he said faintly. "I'll play." There was a deafening whoop from all sides of him, and Harry looked at Oliver. "Don't make me want to kill myself if I don't catch it," he muttered.

"Oh you'll catch it," Oliver said, coming towards him and clapping both hands on Harry's shoulders. "Or you'll die trying." He grinned, and turned to face the rest of the team. "GET IN GEAR!" he shouted. "I'm going to go and call an early time out—give Potter a few extra minutes to get himself in order—I SAID MOVE!"

The Chudley Cannons scrambled back to the tunnel and Harry was carried along with them, numb with disbelief, the butterbeer he still clutched in his hand sloshing all down his arm. It was a good thing he hadn't drunk any of it. He was going to play. Quidditch. Professionally. Now. For an undefeated team. In front of *everyone*.

He was out of his mind.

"Your uniform's in this locker, Potter." Oliver steered Harry to the spot. "Everyone else, get yourselves dressed and get back up there! Drills, team! Marty, you're in charge!"

The other players quickly traded in their practice gear for their uniforms and left the lockers, shouting encouraging things to Harry as they left. He tried to smile at them, but had a hard time of it.

"And you'll take Maureen's broom, Harry," Oliver called, heading for the door.

Harry's stomach clenched. "I-I was thinking my Firebolt—perhaps Ron could—"

"Sorry. I'd prefer you to fly what you're used to, but there are regulations. You'll have to use a league-approved broom. I'll grab it while you suit up."

Dazed, Harry pulled on the long, woolen socks, the knickerbockers, the jumper and the sleek, rubbery black trainers. He strapped on the shin, elbow, knee and hand guards, and shoved his fingers into the half-gloves. When everything was in place, he reached into the locker and lifted out the cloak. It was dazzling orange, the color and sheen of Hagrid's pumpkins, and it was heavier than the one he'd worn for Gryffindor. Harry grabbed it by the top and swirled it back over his shoulders, clasping it at the base of his throat. He shut the locker and turned to the mirror.

There he was, double C's and speeding cannon ball emblazoned across his chest, looking every inch like someone who belonged on Ron's bedroom wall at the Burrow. He pulled his wand and tapped his glasses, muttering the spell Hermione had taught him to repel rain, in case there was any, and then he did the charm she had later taught him for keeping his glasses snug to his head, so they'd never fall off. He owed her for that one. He shook out his arms and legs, and stretched his neck. His heart raced nervously, but the uniform felt natural. Comfortable. He liked the weight of it and always had.

"Ready?"

Oliver had returned, holding out the most beautiful broom Harry had ever touched. Its dark, polished cherry wood handle had a slimmer grip than his own broom, and there were slender, golden rods sticking out a few inches in either direction, just under the spot where Harry knew the cushioning charm to be. The tail swept and curved into what had to be the most aerodynamic shape on the market. "*Firebolt 5*" it said in gold script on the handle.

"She had these put in," Oliver explained, pointing to the golden rods. "Footholds. You've seen her do it—bend her knees and keep her feet pulled up under her bum for speed. These keep her feet up the whole game without tiring her out—just rest the tops of your feet there. Dead useful speed strategy."

"She won't mind?" Harry asked doubtfully, not sure he'd want another Seeker riding his broom, if it were as nice as this one. Especially a Seeker who didn't know what the hell he was doing.

"She's unconscious," Oliver replied. "Take the broom. You're going to run drills on it for half an hour before the game starts so you can get used to it. But first, Harry, listen close. The Kestrels had a by last game—that means they didn't play. It's been four weeks since their last match, and while that doesn't mean they're out of shape, it means they've lost competitive momentum." Oliver began to pace. "Plus which, they're two and two—two wins, two losses. Their last game before their by was a loss. Not in a good mental state, I'd say. We, on the other hand, are undefeated." He gave Harry a meaningful look. "Undefeated. Five-oh."

"I get it, Oliver," Harry said, wishing very much that Fred and George Weasley would appear over Oliver's shoulders and start wagging their eyebrows and making rude comments. No one but Oliver Wood had the power to make him feel quite so eleven.

"They're going to be feeling confident, now that they've put Maureen out of play." Oliver growled. "Deliberate bunch of dirty bastards. I've always thought well of Kyle Kirkpatrick's team, but Boomer must've finally rubbed off on him."

"Boomer?"

"Tim Boomer, first Beater for the Kestrels—plays the left side of the pitch for the most part, and plays dirty. Filthy dirty. There's no doubt in my mind he sent that Bludger at Maureen's head on purpose, and he'll do the same to you. Keep your eyes on him."

Harry nodded, feeling suddenly that perhaps riding dragons was no more dangerous than playing Quidditch, after all.

"Duncan's the other Beater, but don't pay too much attention to him. He's nothing on Marty and Medusa. Leave Friar to the Chasers—she's a fine Keeper but they'll destroy her. And leave their Chasers to me." Oliver's eyes flashed. "I know all their stunts."

"Who's their Seeker?" Harry asked, wishing he had followed the season a bit more closely. Ron would've known all this off the top of his head.

"Adam Holgate. And he's very, very good, Harry. Their losses are Chaser-based, not Seeker. Even if he'd caught the Snitch in the last game, the Kestrels would have lost by a hundred and ten points."

Harry gave a low whistle.

"And bear in mind that the Kestrels are famous for distracting opposing Seekers. Those leprechauns are nasty, clever little beasts. Don't go throwing yourself at a bit of leprechaun gold, thinking it's the Snitch."

Harry had never considered that. "But if I see something shine—" he began. "I can't waste time trying to work out if—"

"They're forbidden to toss the coins over the boundary lines, so just keep to your boundaries and don't let 'em lure you out. They've got quite talented at throwing the things straight up in the air, the little buggers—just centimeters away from the pitch. But if it's over the line, it's not the Snitch. Don't waste your energy."

"I'll try."

"No." Oliver stopped pacing and glared at him. "There's no trying here, Harry. There's just winning. Are you ready?"

"I..." Harry glanced at himself in the mirror. "No."

"Too bad. Chat's over. Time to play." Oliver strode past him to the locker room door, and Harry followed his captain out. Together they hiked up the dark corridor of the tunnel, and towards the pitch.

Harry felt his stomach lurch and growl with every step. He had to be mad. A lunatic. The lights from the pitch were growing brighter—it was fully dark now, and that was only going to make things more complicated—the murmur of the crowd had increased tenfold, and he dreaded what he would see when they walked out into the light...

Oliver stopped short and turned around, nearly knocking Harry over. "How did you know to show up?" he demanded. "I would've got round to sending for you, but you got here before anyone even—"

"I was here to watch the match," Harry said. "Ron has season tickets."

Oliver nodded, then peered at Harry. He sniffed, frowned, and sniffed again. "You didn't go *drinking* anything while you were in the stands, did you?"

"No." Harry waited until Oliver had turned around, then rolled his eyes and followed him onto the pitch.

No sooner did he squint against the bright lights than a noise unlike anything Harry had ever heard erupted in the Quidditch stands. It was a roar—a wall of frenzied sound that began in the stands and rushed down to press Harry on all sides, filling his ears, nearly blowing back his hair. He staggered, and looked up.

"AND IT'S TRUE!" came a familiar announcer's voice, blasting above all the others, filling the stadium. "RUMOR CONFIRMED! HARRY POTTER, SECOND RESERVE SEEKER FOR THE CHUDLEY CANNONS, WILL BE PLAYING IN PLACE OF MAUREEN KNIGHT!" The crowd's mighty cheer doubled, drowning out the sound of the Kestrel supporters' harps and causing their leprechauns to scowl and stop throwing gold. Somewhere, someone began chanting Harry's name. Within seconds, everyone had taken up the chant, and the air was full of "HAR-RY POT-TER" punctuated by the rhythmic noise of thousands of hands clapping.

Harry's heart thudded into his stomach and his stomach dropped into his feet. He took a step closer to Oliver. "But I haven't *done* anything," he whispered.

"Looks like you'd better, then," was Oliver's comforting reply.

"THE MATCH WILL BEGIN IN FIFTEEN MINUTES" the referee called from the center of the pitch. "WRAP UP THE DRILLS."

Oliver clapped a hand on Harry's back. "Get used to the broom. Go on."

Doing his best to ignore the chanting crowd and the disturbing screams of “Harry, I love you!” and “Marry me, Harry!” Harry mounted the Firebolt 5. It felt like his own broom, only sleeker. He tucked his feet onto the golden rods and lifted off, getting the feel of the handle.

Perfect.

There was no other way to describe it. Harry knew that he would still be flying his old Nimbus 2000, if it hadn't been destroyed; that broom had been his first and it still grieved him to think about it. And he'd never give up his own Firebolt; it was an excellent broom, and it meant the world to him because of who it had come from and what he had done on it. But he couldn't pretend that either broom came up to this.

This was *flying*. He barely pressed left—he faced the left side of the pitch. He put both thumbs on the handle and gave the slightest hint of downward pressure—a flawless dive. Harry grinned and pulled up, adjusting to the feeling of having his feet tucked beneath him. He dove again, shooting towards the pitch, pulling up only when he knew he'd break his face if he didn't—he shot into the air, tried a sloth grip roll, and dropped into a dive so steep that the Firebolt 5 made a right angle with the pitch. He pulled up short and hovered as close to the ground as he could, rolled again, and climbed back into the sky to join his teammates. His heart was lighter than it had been in weeks, and he couldn't get the smile off his face. Why, oh, why, had he ever chosen the dragons? Dimly, he heard the continuing roar of the crowd, but he didn't care about them. He was going to play Quidditch and it was going to be *fun*. He sought out Ron among the now teeming crowd, and waved. Ron's fist shot into the air, and Harry could have sworn he heard his friend's voice shout above everyone else's.

He wished Ginny were here. And Hermione. Everyone.

“TEAM!” It was Oliver's voice, and Harry spun towards it. “HUDDLE!”

The Chudley Cannons made a tight circle, and all eyes were on Oliver. He looked at them each in turn, his face alight with confidence.

“We're going to do this,” he said. “We've come up from nothing, we've beaten the odds, we've shown them all a thing or two, and are we going to stop now, when we're five up?”

“NO!” they shouted.

“Are we going to let them take out our Seeker and throw us off?”

“NO!”

“Are we going to march down to that mediwizarding wing when this is through, and put that Snitch in Maureen's hand?”

“YES!” Harry choked it out with everyone else, though his heart had slammed up into his throat.

“Give me your hands!” Oliver stuck out his own, and every player put a hand in the center. “And give me our motto!”

“WE! SHALL! CONQUER!”

The last word rang in the air, full of strength and vibrancy. It was contagious, and to Harry's relief the Cannons fans began chanting the team motto, rather than his name. They were still chanting a minute later; their determined voices pitted against the spirited strumming of the Kestrels' fans, when the two teams formed their semi-circles around the center of the pitch to wait for the release of the Quaffle.

“Ready, Harry?” Firoza whispered on his right, elbowing his arm.

“Yes,” Harry lied.

“Good. Let's kick some arse.”

The small referee appeared below them. He mounted his broom, blew his whistle and kicked open the crate at his feet—four balls sped into the air: two Bludgers, one Quaffle and (Harry barely got a glimpse of it before it flickered out of sight) the Golden Snitch.

“THERE THEY GO, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN—WYETH, KERRY, NEWLAND, POTTER-HOLLWED, KIRKPATRICK, DE GOODE, HOLGATE-FRIAR AND WOOD AT THE GOALHOOPS—”

Chaos. That was how it felt to Harry, who had never played Quidditch like this. Obviously Oliver hadn't been joking at the end of summer tryouts, when he'd said that they were only just getting to the *real* practices. Harry knew enough to lift out of the circle as quickly as possible before he was smashed, and he pulled up on the nose of his broom. Still, he didn't escape the fray without getting jostled so hard on all sides that he had to work to keep his balance. He was slammed left and right by the Kestrel Chasers as they went in pursuit of the Quaffle, and he fought upwards, gripping the broom handle for dear life.

“NEWLAND WITH THE QUAFFLE—REVERSE PASS TO WYETH—WYETH TO THE HOOPS AND—OOOH, BLUDGER TO THE BROOMTAIL! NO GOAL!”

Harry was high enough now to see the game below him without getting tangled up in it, and he

was amazed by the zigzagging speed with which the two teams had launched into play. Formations of orange and emerald green swerved around each other in vibrant, clashing patterns that Harry could hardly follow—a few were drills that he'd seen in the summer, but now the moves were faster than lightning and almost unrecognizable.

Tim Boomer, wearing a look of ugly determination, sped after the Bludger he'd just hit at Firoza. He swung around behind it and raised his bat. Only when Boomer glanced up and adjusted his arm did Harry realize that the Beater was aiming for him.

Smack! The Bludger flew with a force and speed that Harry had never had to worry about in school. Luckily, he had been watching, and dodged the iron ball with ease.

"NICE ROLL, POTTER! WELL, IT LOOKS LIKE BOOMER'S TAKING THE FIRST RULE IN THE BEATER'S BIBLE A BIT LITERALLY THIS EVENING. KIRKPATRICK WITH THE QUAFFLE AND A PASS TO HOLLWEDEL—SHE'S A WHIZ WITH THE WOOLLONGONG SHIMMY—YES, THERE IT IS, FAKING LEFT, RIGHT, LEFT AND AGAIN—SHE SHOOTS! BUT WOOD SAW IT COMING A MILE AWAY! GREAT SAVE!"

The Cannons' side of the stadium exploded in cheers. Orange flags waved, and banners bearing Oliver's name were unfurled and shaken madly. Oliver had grabbed the Quaffle with both hands; he lobbed it to Cole, who made herself as flat as possible and sped towards Paul and Medusa. The three closed into formation. With Medusa in the lead beating back interference, and Paul cutting between Cole and the opposing Chasers, they made it to the scoring area in record time. Medusa dove to catch a Bludger before it could interrupt at the crucial moment, and Paul pulled off to let Cole into the scoring area alone. She dove right, pulled up, and hurled the Quaffle.

"CANNONS SCORE!"

Friar had missed it by an inch. Cole, Paul and Medusa flew back to mid pitch with no time for celebration and play resumed in seconds.

Harry scanned the air around him, trying to memorize the area. Something shone—he caught a glimpse of it out of the corner of his eye and pivoted—but no. It was the goal posts. There was another glint of something far below and Harry swung towards that—no again. Referee's whistle. Rapidly he catalogued every metallic flash: Marty's wedding band, the foil wrappers of the fans' crisps, the gleaming strings of the Kestrel supporters' harps and the bright yellow Ks on their players' robes. Under the glare of the ultra bright stadium flood lanterns, everything seemed to shine, and the additional distraction of flashbulbs, which popped madly from the press booth and on the sidelines, didn't help matters at all.

Adam Holgate didn't seem fazed by the lights and flashes, and Harry realized what an advantage his opponent had. Holgate had got used to night games in stadiums like this one; he hovered just outside the Kestrels' scoring area, hawk-eyeing every inch of pitch, his hands poised and ready on his broom. His gaze skimmed Harry. Their eyes locked—but only for the briefest moment before both of them looked away again, each intent on finding the Snitch. Harry felt the old competitive rush shoot through him, and he thrilled to it. He would catch it. He *would*.

"HOLLWEDEL, KIRKPATRICK AND DE GOODE IN THE HAWKSHEAD ATTACK FORMATION—NO SURPRISE THERE—AND DE GOODE'S GOT DE QUAFFLE! RIGHT, SORRY—THEY'VE SHUNTED THE CANNONS OUT OF THE WAY—NICE BLUDGER, GUDGEON! BUT DUNCAN BEATS IT BACK—DE GOODE SHOOTS—WOOD SAVES! BUT IT'S IN KIRKPATRICK'S HANDS NOW AND—"

Kyle Kirkpatrick lobbed the Quaffle with such force that, though Oliver managed to get a hand behind it, its momentum pushed his hand back through the goal hoop.

"KESTRELS SCORE! TEN ALL, AND THIS IS SHAPING UP TO BE A RIPPER OF A MATCH, YES SIR, THESE KESTRELS ARE HERE TO FIGHT!"

The teams pulled back. Oliver growled and chucked the Quaffle to Firoza, who pulled it under her arm and shot like a bullet straight at the goal, dodging Bludgers with incredible precision. Just as she flew under Harry, he saw Hollwedel approaching her from the right like a freight train, as Kirkpatrick closed in from the left, either to force Firoza off track or to smash her between them.

Harry dove. Before Hollwedel knew what had happened, Harry had zipped in front of her, barely missing being smashed himself. Hollwedel spun away, leaving Firoza open to dodge right. She looped under Kirkpatrick, and hurled the Quaffle through the goal hoop before Friar had time to recover. Twenty-ten.

"AND POTTER'S NOT ONLY A SEEKER, BUT A DIVERSIONARY TACTICIAN! EXCELLENT CHASING BY NEWLAND!"

Another announcer's voice joined in to counterpoint.

"YES, IT'S HARRY POTTER'S PROFESSIONAL DEBUT, AND IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN IF HIS POWERS EXTEND TO THE QUIDDITCH PITCH. HE'S UP AGAINST HOLGATE, WHO'S NO SLOUCH, LEE. POTTER WOULD DO BETTER TO KEEP HIS EYE ON THE PRIZE AND STAY OUT OF CHASER

SKIRMISHES."

Just then, Holgate dove. Harry's whole body reacted—he followed instantly, hurtling after Holgate, who had a twenty-yard advantage. Harry couldn't see the Snitch yet, but he didn't care—he leaned forward and strained, pulling his feet up tight and shooting forward with increased speed. He gained five yards—ten—now he could have touched Holgate's broomtail—now he was nearly kissing the pitch—

There was no Snitch. Harry gripped the handle of the Firebolt 5 with both hands, and yanked up its nose not a second too soon. He was going too fast to pull out of the dive with any grace and he heard the crowd gasp as he fought to stay in control. He flipped over and clutched the broom with his knees, desperate to stay on.

Holgate had already soared off, cool as anything.

By the time Harry managed to sort himself out, breathing heavily and glaring after his opponent, play had already recommenced. His chest burned and he set his jaw—Holgate had played him for a fool, and won. He'd been Wronski Feinted, and very nearly killed. He heard a few jeers erupt from the stands.

"I'D SAY HE'S GOT HIS EYE ON THE PRIZE, SKIP!"

"WELL, HE'S CERTAINLY EAGER, LEE, BUT WHERE'S HIS HEAD? ANY SEEKER IN GOOD SHAPE WOULD'VE CALLED THAT FEINT TEN YARDS SOONER. IF THIS IS THE KIND OF PLAYING POTTER'S GOT TO OFFER, HE'LL BE LUCKY TO PULL AN ACCIDENTAL PLUMPTON PASS AND CATCH THE SNITCH UP HIS SLEEVE!"

"IF HE DOES IT LIKE THAT, HE'LL PULL A *POTTER* PASS, SKIP."

"SORRY—A *POTTER* PASS? I DON'T—"

"HE'LL SWALLOW IT."

The game rolled on and Firoza's deadly accurate reverse passes gave both Cole and Paul the opportunity to score again. Harry watched it all on high alert, but it wasn't until Cole scored a third time, bringing the score to fifty-ten and making the Cannons fans roar with delight, that Harry finally caught a telltale flash of gold in his peripheral vision.

He turned his head—*yes*. It was fluttering towards the pitch on the Kestrels' side, its color mingling with the strings of the harps in the stands. But Harry could distinguish it well enough; he flattened himself against his broom and sped at a downward angle towards the Snitch, flying so fast that the freezing wind cut against his face and made his ears ache. Holgate was nowhere in sight. He'd *have* it. Harry gained on the falling golden ball—he stretched out his hand, waiting to feel the cold, carved metal in his palm—

The Snitch had disappeared. Harry blinked and flew right over the boundary line.

"FOUL!" The referee's whistle blew. "PLAYER OUT OF BOUNDS! QUAFFLE TO THE KESTRELS!"

Below Harry there was an ugly, gleeful chorus of laughter. He looked down and saw the leprechaun mascots leering up at him, flicking their gold coins into the air. Harry's face burned. He pivoted and got back in bounds, feeling extremely stupid. Flashbulbs popped on all sides and the fans that had previously been shouting his name were now groaning and calling out inappropriate suggestions—"MIND YOU DON'T TRY FOR MY NOSE RING, POTTER!"—while the Kestrel fans tittered.

"Oi, SHUT IT, you great-dirty—" In the stands, Ron was beside himself. Both he and Mr. Gladrag stood pressed to the front wall of their box, totally ignoring the angry fans' repeated requests that they sit down, and railing at all those who dared to mock Harry.

"BETTER COVER UP MY SHOE BUCKLES!" yelled one chortling fan in the next aisle.

Ron clenched his teeth and drew his wand. "YOU—SODDING—"

"No, lad!" Gladrag grabbed Ron's arm. "You'll get thrown out, and you'll miss it! Put up those Omnioculars now, move!"

Ron recovered himself and refocused the Omnioculars on the game. He needed to save every second for Hermione, who would have a *conniption* fit if she missed any of it. "YOU'VE GOT IT, MATE!" he screamed, his voice getting hoarser by the second. "NEXT TIME, YOU'VE BLOODY WELL GOT IT!"

"You're doing great," Marty said, flying past Harry and giving him a wink. "Just you keep going for it."

Twice as on edge now, Harry returned to his bird's eye viewpoint of the game. He couldn't afford another distraction like that one—what if the *real* Snitch had appeared while he was busy with a bit of leprechaun gold? And after Oliver had warned him? He felt nauseated. Just the idea of it was enough to make him want to be sick.

"THE KESTRELS ARE BACK IN POSSESSION!"

Hollwedel took the Quaffle. Backed by De Goode, she made for Oliver and broke into another Shimmy right outside the scoring area. She faked right, released the Quaffle—Oliver nearly leapt off

his broom to make the save. He missed. Irish harps began to play in victorious harmony.

"STODGING! NO GOAL!"

The harps came to a sour stop and the referee pointed to DeGoode, who had failed to pull back quickly enough, and was still half an inch inside the scoring area. DeGoode cursed freely and zoomed back to mid pitch.

"THE SCORE REMAINS FIFTY-TEN. QUAFFLE TO THE CANNONS."

Oliver, his face grim and glistening with sweat, retrieved the Quaffle and threw it to Paul, who passed off to Firoza. She shot upwards, out of the mob of Kestrels who threatened her on all sides, but they followed suit so quickly that it seemed she wouldn't have a chance to shoot for the hoops. Despite this, she pulled back her arm as if to throw. Kirkpatrick swept down on her, arm out to make a steal, but at the last second, she tossed the Quaffle straight down through all their feet, to where Cole was open and waiting. Cole put the Quaffle past a flustered Friar, and scored.

"SIXTY-TEN! AND AS GOOD A PORSKOFF PLOY AS I'VE EVER SEEN!"

Kirkpatrick recovered the Quaffle for the Kestrels and zoomed recklessly forward—but Paul sidled up behind him and snatched the Quaffle from under his arm. Boomer, who had been in a hover at the boundary-edge, just by the leprechauns, now pulled up and raced towards Paul. He had no Bludger, but managed to cut Paul off in the front by locking their broom handles.

"BLURTING!" cried the referee. "QUAFFLE TO THE CANNONS!"

The Kestrel fans complained loudly, and some began to chant Boomer's name.

"WHAT A DELIBERATE FOUL! LOOKS LIKE SOMEONE'S GETTING WORRIED, SKIP!"

"AND FOR NO GOOD REASON, LEE. IF THE SNITCH COMES OUT BEFORE THE CANNONS HAVE MANAGED ANOTHER TEN GOALS—AND IT'S LIKELY THAT IT WILL—THEN THE KESTRELS ARE PRACTICALLY A SHOE-IN FOR THE WIN."

"OH, IS THAT SO?"

"YES, THAT'S—" There was a loud blast of static, and the announcers were cut off in mid-sentence.

The Cannons took the Quaffle and Harry scoured the pitch, determined to miss nothing.

He was so focused that he didn't see the Bludger heading for his hand until it had almost crushed his fingers—he lurched forward in panic and felt the Bludger scrape along his back. Though he was protected by the heavy uniform cloak, there was enough pain to tell Harry that he was now missing a good stripe of skin. He grimaced and whirled to see Boomer not ten yards away, barely hiding laughter. Red-hot anger blazed in Harry, but he didn't have a chance to do anything about it.

Over Boomer's head, something glittered.

Harry felt a surge of triumph—Boomer had certainly got his attention at the wrong moment—this was *it*. He leaned forward and shot towards the Snitch, which was dropping lower and disappearing behind Boomer's head. Harry shifted angles and knocked Boomer to the side and out of his way. There was a painful—but somehow satisfying—collision of shoulder on shoulder and skull on skull; Harry's head began to throb but it didn't matter. He strained to find the Snitch. Where *was* it? It hadn't had time to disappear... it had to be right here...

The whole crowd gasped at once. They seemed to get to their feet as one body and lean towards the opposite end of the pitch. Harry's head snapped to the place where they were looking and his blood ran cold.

There was the Snitch. Half the pitch away, its silver wings unmistakable against the shining green grass. And Holgate was right on top of it.

There was no hope. Knowing that the game was over, and flooded with a bitter, sickening disappointment, Harry hurried forward anyway, determined to make an effort, unable to sit still when the Snitch was in sight. But Holgate's hand was already stretched out, and the Snitch was ten feet from his fingers.

THWACK!

Marty and Medusa had brought their bats down simultaneously on a Bludger. It went speeding towards the Snitch, flying straight and true and faster than Harry had ever seen a Bludger go. It grazed Holgate's outstretched fingers, making the Kestrels' Seeker yelp and recoil. Surprise and obvious pain threw Holgate off balance and he spiraled away from his target.

The Snitch scarpered off.

"BRILLIANT!" Lee's voice was hoarse, and the whole crowd could now hear some kind of struggle happening in the press box, along with the announcements. "THE MOST ACCURATE DOPPLE-BEATER DEFENSE I'VE EVER SEEN!"

"JUST AS IMPRESSIVE WAS HOLGATE'S PINPOINT PRECISION—THE MATCH WAS NEARLY OVER RIGHT THERE, WASN'T IT, LEE?"

"NOT A CHANCE, SKIP, YOU WANK-"

"AND CAN ANYONE TELL ME WHY POTTER WAS DANCING AROUND WITH BOOMER WHEN THE SNITCH FINALLY DECIDED TO SHOW ITSELF? HE'S CERTAINLY FORTUNATE TO BE FLYING WITH SUCH A FINE TEAM TONIGHT—APPARENTLY, WOOD'S RESERVES ARE WELL BELOW THE STANDARD OF HIS FIRST STRING—" There was another blast of static, and the announcer's voices cut out again.

It still didn't make sense. Harry's back ached and the uncomfortable stickiness inside his shirt told him he was bleeding hard. He glanced back at the spot where he'd been hit by the Bludger, and tried to work it out. He'd *seen* something. It hadn't been his imagination, and it had been the size of a Snitch.

Or a Galleon coin.

Harry narrowed his eyes at Boomer, who smirked up at him from below. Boomer *had* been hovering next to the leprechauns... Perhaps he'd taken a leaf out of their book and decided to try a diversionary tactic of his own, however illegal...

"Didn't you hear that, Harry?" Medusa said, flying up to him red faced and panting. "They're taking a penalty shot, we have to clear out."

"What for?" Harry asked, dismayed.

"Blatching and Cobbing. They're calling you on that collision with Boomer and a double foul's a penalty. Come on, get back behind center."

He'd been hit, he'd almost lost the game, and he'd been duped into fouling twice. Irritated with himself and furious with Boomer, Harry flew back to mid pitch and watched Kyle Kirkpatrick make toward Oliver, Quaffle in hand. Oliver flew a rapid double eight loop, seeming to block all three hoops at once. But of course that was impossible, and as soon as Oliver was as far right as his looping took him, Kirkpatrick shot left. Harry clutched his broom and winced—it didn't seem possible to stop the goal, but Oliver looped swiftly around again, curled his legs around his broom, and flung himself sideways in front of the Quaffle, taking it right in the chest.

"NO GOAL!"

The crowd stamped and cheered, and Harry exhaled. He hadn't even realized that he'd been holding his breath.

The match resumed at twice its previous speed and brutality. The Kestrels now threw themselves entirely into defense and Quaffle-stealing, but their efforts seemed to result in more accidental anatomy-seizing than anything else, and their errors put the Quaffle back in the hands of the Cannons again and again. Goal after goal went past Abbie Friar, who was wearing down with every shot. Not even Boomer, whose double-handed assaults on the Bludgers should have resulted in several serious injuries to the Cannons, seemed able to break their strength and focus. They were simply a stunning team; Oliver's harsh practice schedule had certainly paid off and Harry found himself wishing he could watch their maneuvers from the stands. As it was, he sped from corner to corner, unblinking, making sure to be on all sides of play so that nothing could escape his sight. He would not fail again.

"ONE HUNDRED FORTY-TEN!" cried the referee. "QUAFFLE TO THE KESTRELS!"

It hardly mattered, though, Harry reflected, whether he caught the Snitch or not. Unless it came out right now, there was a good chance that the Cannons were going to win it without him.

Something sparkled in the air on his right.

Harry swerved towards it, lurched forward—and stopped. Whatever it had been, it had already vanished, and Boomer was sitting close to the spot where he'd just seen it. The Kestrels' Beater was looking, perhaps too deliberately, in the other direction.

"What the hell are you doing?" Harry hollered at his back. Boomer didn't turn. But he was tossing out leprechaun gold, Harry was sure of it now, and he flew towards Oliver as fast as he could.

"Call a time out!" he yelled, approaching the goal hoops.

Oliver didn't look at him, so intent was he on watching the movements of the Quaffle, which was still in his Chasers' hands at the other end of the pitch. "Why?" he barked. "What's happening?"

"It's Boomer—he's got a pocket full of leprechaun gold and he's tossing it out as a distraction," Harry panted, watching Oliver's face go scarlet with rage.

"That—" and Oliver called Boomer exactly what Ron would've.

"That's what had me going before," Harry explained hurriedly, still scanning the pitch for fear that the Snitch would choose this moment to flutter out and catch him off guard yet again. "Get the ref to check him, I'll bet he's still got some on him—call a time out—"

"Done."

Oliver raised his arms to make the giant T that signaled the need for a pause—but before he had done it, there was a flash of light in the center of the pitch.

Harry spun towards it as if magnetized, and strained his eyes as hard as he could. Was that... *silver* and gold...? And was it flying... *up*?

"DON'T CALL ANYTHING!" he shouted frantically. Without wasting another second, he shot forward towards what he knew was the Golden Snitch, and the closer he got, the more obvious it became; it shivered and hovered and threatened to dart at any second. It had to be *his*.

"YEAH, HARRY! IT'S *YOURS*!"

It was Ron's voice, and his single, hoarse cheer ignited an agitated hum which swept the stands. The noise started low and gained momentum as Harry did, buzzing and shrieking, the rumble of cheers and shouts growing until its volume made the air seem to vibrate, sending Harry forward even faster.

"GO ON, HARRY!" Oliver bellowed behind him. "CATCH IT, MAN!"

The dark world outside the pitch and the bright stadium around him seemed to narrow down to one walnut-sized point as Harry sped forward, his back throbbing, his fingers stiff with cold, his hair sleeking back in the wind. On the opposite side of the Snitch, equally as far from it as he was, Harry saw the dim blur of emerald green and yellow that he knew must be Adam Holgate, racing headlong towards him. It hardly mattered. Holgate would have to smash right into him if he wanted that Snitch.

Twenty yards—Harry flattened to his broom. The world was gone in a haze of speed. Fifteen—he stretched out one hand. His eyes stung in the wind, even behind his glasses, but he forced them to stay open; he would not blink. Ten—he let go with both hands and stretched towards the silver wings that uncurled and beat and flashed and toyed with him. Five yards—Harry rocketed forward without a care for his safety—there was Holgate, just on the other side of the Snitch, going just as fast as he was, looking just as unlikely to back away... Three yards.... Two...

Harry stretched until he thought his arm would come out of the socket.

CRUNCH!

Pain. Agonizing pain—his arm hadn't come out of the socket, but had gone into it instead. There was a gasp and groan from the crowd. Harry gripped the broom with his left hand which, for a moment, still seemed to be working, but it didn't last. The pain dulled every other sense, and Harry felt his muscles relax... gravity gave way...

Hitting the ground wasn't as bad as it should have been. Harry thought he'd heard someone yell when he was on his way down—maybe it had been Oliver. Oliver had managed to slow down Knight's body, after all. It was probably the same spell. Harry's thoughts grew fuzzier. The ultra bright stadium lanterns and the dark, dark sky swam above his head, mixing together in his blurred vision to make a lovely mess of light.

Beside him, someone groaned miserably. Harry managed to turn his head.

Holgate lay beside him, his eyes shut and his mouth open, blood gushing out of his left ear and scrape marks all along his face. Harry couldn't move his right hand. Perhaps his hand and Holgate's head had...

"Harry—oh, Harry—"

Harry couldn't turn his head far enough to see the owner of that voice, but he knew who it was, and regardless of the pain in his arm, a warm feeling flooded his stomach. "Ginny," he croaked. "You're... here?"

"Yes of course—I heard your name on the wireless and came right up—but they won't let me in there and oh, you're talking—thank god- I thought—"

"Shh, Ginny, it's all right." The voice was Ron's. He sounded shaken and subdued, not at all like he'd looked up there in the stands.

"Harry, can you hear what I'm saying?" It was a mediwizard. His kind, black face loomed above Harry's, and his white teeth flashed. "Can you tell me your name, son?"

"It's... Harry Potter."

"Good. And how old are you?"

Harry thought about it. "Eighteen?"

"Where do you live?"

"Stagsden."

"Who is the Minister of Magic?"

Harry laughed weakly. "Arthur Weasley. I... I don't have a concussion. It's my arm. My arm—hurts." He had a sudden vision of Lockhart, standing above him and nancying about with a shiny wand. He cringed at the memory. "Be careful," he muttered.

The mediwizard touched his arm gently, near the shoulder. "Here?" he said, but before had even got the word out, Harry had hollered in pain. "All right," said the mediwizard. "All right. We'll get you sorted. Just lie still now."

Moments later, Harry was floated into the air. He lay suspended, feeling surprisingly little pain. Mostly there was just a shadowy haze... and a funny thumping on his arm. It made the pain worse.

"Something..." he managed. "My arm—my elbow—is bouncing."

The mediwizard chuckled. "It may feel that way, but don't you worry, we'll get it all taken care of, Mr. Potter."

"No..." The thumping had greatly increased and it didn't seem to be a part of his arm. There was something...

Harry's heart froze with hope.

"There's something in my sleeve," he whispered. "Look up my sleeve. Hurry."

The mediwizard sighed. "Delirious," he muttered, but obligingly lifted the sleeve cuff of Harry's orange robes, and rolled them back.

Harry reached across his body with his left hand. He groped along his wrist guard to the hot, swollen skin of his elbow until his hand closed around something moving. Something alight. Something cold and small and—

"I caught it," he breathed. "I caught it."

The Snitch beat helplessly against his palm, shivering and twitching, and unfurling its wings between his fingers.

"I caught it," he rasped louder. "Oliver—where's Oliver Wood?"

"Yeah, Harry!" came Ron's strangled cry, from somewhere beyond Harry's field of vision.

Ginny gave a sob.

Oliver said nothing, but a moment later, his face came into view. His eyes were full of tears. "I knew you would," was all he said.

All around Harry, flashbulbs began to pop. He heard the sound of a thousand questions being asked at once, felt the careless, inhumane jostling of what could only have been the press. He shut his eyes.

Harry's hand uncurled. He felt the Snitch lift off, just before the world went black.

A/N: This chapter wasn't meant to be. It never existed in our notes—well, part of it did, but we had decided to cut it. Chapter twenty-eight, or the information therein, was supposed to be the next chapter (and it is therefore very nearly written). But then I picked up Zsenya from the train, and she and I went to dinner, and AtE came up, and it was rainy *story* weather... and...

Author's Notes: (From Zsenya) ... we figured, you know, this story is already 8700 pages long, what are a few more chapters here and there?

A/N II: Thanks to the beta readers of the month: Cap'n Kathy, CoKerry, Firelocks and Jedi B. Special thanks to Arabella's sister, Mosey Posey, who is an awesome athlete and who, in another grand effort to prove that she is NOT an obsessive Harry Potter fan, sat down and sorted out an elaborate Quidditch season schedule which makes it possible for us to be really exact.

A/N III: Yeah, we fudged PoV during the Quidditch match. But we can only blame JKR for setting such a horrible example of the same, in canon.

First String

An AtE Guest Chapter by Firelocks

"Perkins insists that the promotion of Weasley to acting minister can only help the newly reopened Misuse of Muggle Artefacts department. 'In the old days, it was just me and Arthur, alone in this here office,' says Perkins, gesturing to the small, crowded room that is now solely his. 'But now that he's up there, we've got a lot of new interest, a fair crop of new workers, even volunteers, helping us keep the war damage from the Muggles.'"

"Eloise?"

Eloise Midgen held up her left hand to stave off whoever was hovering about her desk. "Deadline—five-thirty—hold on—"

"With recovery efforts moving ahead at the expected rate, Perkins says it won't be long before he can get back to what he sees as the most important part of his job. 'Got to keep those screaming teakettles away from the Muggles,' he laughs. 'Screaming tea kettles, shrinking keys—ah, the good old days.'"

Ten minutes to spare. Eloise relaxed slightly, and her breath released in her chest as she placed her signature flourish at the bottom of the parchment to mark the end of the article. She rushed toward the Features desk without looking back to see who had interrupted her.

"Here—artefacts. Sixteen inches."

Leon Price ran an approving eye over the text. "Good, good, yes, very good, okay." He thrust it into the hands of an editor who just happened to be walking by, and Eloise groaned inwardly to see John Prattleby holding her day's work, a smirk settling on his face.

"Edit that. Five minutes," Leon barked, then fled to the Arts desk. "RUMSON! Get your head out of your arse, I need that story NOW!"

"Well, well." Prattleby scanned the article. "Misuse of Muggle Artefacts, huh?"

Eloise nodded, fixing a smile and hoping Prattleby wouldn't notice its insincerity. A nervous twitch started in her temple.

"So, old Perkins is finally head of his department. Good on him. Looks like a good story, Midgen, I'll get right on it." He turned to walk away, eyes still glued to the parchment, and Eloise exhaled, unwilling to believe she'd got away unscathed.

"Midgen—" called Prattleby from halfway across the newsroom. "Nothing from the minister? Pity, the story could use it. Better luck next time with your Weasley friends, eh?"

A low chorus of snickers started through the room.

"I-r-right." Eloise kept her head down as she turned, trying to shake her ringlets in front of her reddening face. Her desk seemed a mile away, and she slumped toward it. She had thought the others would have given up on her by now, that after almost six months of toiling on stories called *New Aurors Begin Training* and *Floean Fortescue Finances Confectionary*, they'd see that, if nothing else, she was trying. She had thought they'd have realized that that first story, back in June, was a fluke; that she had only spoken to Harry because Ginny had been there, and had only spoken to Ginny because Colin had been there. She'd hoped that these people, who were supposed to be her colleagues, would have realized that she never missed a deadline, and that she worked sixty hours a week. She had hoped they would have realized by now that she hadn't been hired because she almost knew Harry Potter.

She had been wrong.

The tiny cubicle was a riot of parchment and scribbles; Eloise stretched her hands out to clean up, but her breath caught and her eyes unfocused, and she realized she was crying.

"Don't—stupid—don't *do* that," she whispered to herself, only succeeding in dislodging a stream of tears. "You *didn't* need the minister, you don't go bothering the Minister of Magic for stupid articles about his old office. They're wrong."

Someone nearby cleared his throat, and Eloise snapped her head up to see Colin Creevey standing in front of her desk, his camera tucked under his arm, avoiding her gaze. "Sorry, I—I can come back—"

"No, no," said Eloise hurriedly, swiping under her eyes so furiously that the quill she had been holding slid from her fingers and hit Colin in the chest, *nub* first.

"Ow!"

"Oh, Colin! I'm sorry!" Eloise exclaimed, putting her hands to her face in horror. But Colin just met her eyes and started laughing. "Don't laugh! I'm sorry, I hurt you, I'm terrible, I'm just so distracted—"

"Really, it's fine." Colin's laughter only redoubled when he saw the massive inksplotch traveling down his robes. "I think you missed your calling, though—ever hear of darts?"

Eloise blinked. "Darts?"

"They're—it's not important. I'll take you to a Muggle pub one of these days and show you," he said, then suddenly coughed and turned his head.

Eloise briefly imagined herself walking into a Muggle pub with Colin, and felt her head go light. She clamped her hands harder to her face.

"So." Colin's face was still slightly pink from the coughing fit. "Are you done for the night?"

"Once Prattleby gets through massacre—I mean—editing—my story, yes. You?"

"I'm just waiting for a few pictures to develop." He stared at her a moment. "And, Mitson wants me to be here when they place them." He pushed back his hair. "And, I should restock the camera." The flush had begun to rise back in his cheeks; he looked like he was about to start hacking again, and Eloise thought about running for a glass of water. "So, maybe—have you eaten?"

Eloise flopped into her chair. She must really look peaked, if Colin had taken to asking vague questions about her health. "No. I forgot. It was this *story*! Oh, I'm so glad it's done. But don't worry, I'll be okay, I won't starve myself or anything. Though I may curse someone," she said, peering at Prattleby, who looked to be gleefully making slash marks all across her article.

Colin laughed again, his hair shaking down around his eyes. Eloise almost sighed.

"No, you won't. You'd never." He thrust his hands in his pockets and looked at the floor. "Anyway. I'll be over there." He gestured toward his desk, which was right outside the darkroom, and Eloise wished she sat closer to the photography section.

"And, El? He *was* wrong."

Eloise watched him walk the full length to his desk before she realized what he had said, and started smiling despite the knot in her gut. He was always so reassuring; often, she didn't know what she'd do without Colin's presence in the newsroom—and he did seem to always be there, the same as she was. She didn't know why she spent so much time there; she had never been part of those last-minute deadlines that made it such an exciting place, but she'd been able to help during a few of times on fact-checking and the like, and that was enough. On most days, she couldn't think of a place she'd rather be, but then worthless idiots like Prattleby made nasty comments, and she felt like running back to her flat for a bubble bath and a nice, long book. That is, until Colin turned up and showed her a picture, or asked about her latest story, and she decided to stick around, just for a few more minutes.

She had certainly not expected him to show up at the *Prophet*. She hadn't ever expected to see him again, not after what had happened to his brother. She had been on the Hogwarts lawn, halfway around the lake, when it had happened, and remembered the cold sweep of events far too clearly. In retrospect, it had been lucky she was there; after all, few sixth years had been able to produce a Patronus, however feeble, and a second year had nearly been Kissed before a hard-earned shadow of Eloise's protector—now a wide, white swan—discouraged the advancing Dementor. But then a vicious and terrible thing had risen from the sunken banks of the lake, and other second years hadn't been as fortunate.

So when Colin had been hired, just two days after Eloise, it came as a friendly shock. Her sister had come in that day from London, where she was trying to make it as an actress; squib or not, Beatrice had always had a magic way with tall, gorgeous men, which was probably because she was tall and gorgeous herself, and always had been. With wide, blue eyes and long blonde hair that reached her slim hips, Beatrice resembled a Muggle version of a veela. Just a few years ago, Eloise would have traded every bit of her own magical blood to look like that. She still felt silly that she had ever entertained such thoughts.

"*El—who is that?*" her sister had breathed. Beatrice had perched, legs crossed, atop Eloise's just-christened desk, and pointed one high-heeled shoe at the young man who had just entered the newsroom. Eloise hadn't a clue; she'd never seen him before, though it was clear they were similar in age and should have gone to school together. He did have a familiarity about him but she couldn't place it, certainly not on his broad shoulders and easy posture. No one at Hogwarts had looked like *that*.

"*Midgen!*" Leon had bellowed, and Eloise, not yet used to being addressed by her last name, had actually wondered who Midgen was before she jumped up and scurried to the Features desk. The click-clack of heels behind her said her sister had followed. "*Meet our new photographer, Colin Creevey.*"

"*I—you're not—I mean—COLIN!*" She had said it in such disbelief that she felt she might have insulted him, but Colin had just let his jaw drop and answered with an equally astonished "ELOISE!" that had made her giggle with embarrassment and delight.

"*Then you know each other. Good. Creevey's going to take Harry Potter's picture. Go with him, but let him go first. Here, questions.*" Leon had shoved a small scroll into her hands, and a vaguely shocked Eloise had realized she was being assigned her first interview. And it was with Harry Potter, which meant it would most likely go on the front page.

She'd thought she'd be ill.

"*Does he know we're coming?*" she'd asked timidly.

Leon had laughed. "*On my desk at five,*" he said, and stalked off.

She must have looked terrified, because Colin had instantly assured her that he'd clear the interview with Harry first. Someone coughed from behind her, and Eloise rushed to introduce her sister, exulting privately at the way Colin shook her hand then turned back, barely noticing the blast of charm Beatrice had tried to send his way. Eloise had wondered if Colin knew what a gentleman he was.

"*We should wait awhile before going, just make sure they're awake. Feel like filling me in on some of the things I've missed around here?*"

Eloise had ushered Beatrice out of the office quite quickly, then sat with Colin at her desk and tried to catch him up. She'd been shocked at how very mature, and how very different, he'd seemed. They hadn't spoken often at school; he was just the squeaky little kid who took all the pictures. He was also two years her junior, but before that first lunch was over, she felt as if there was no age difference at all between them; if anything, she was intimidated by the professional know-how Colin had picked up during his apprenticeships at Muggle newspapers, which turned out to come in useful. If he hadn't been at the Harry interview, she might have died of nerves. And if he hadn't been around the newsroom after her story ran, reassuring her that the stares she was getting from other reporters were fueled by jealousy, she might have quit altogether.

A sharp *CRACK!* followed by a loud chorus of groans snapped Eloise back to consciousness, and she jumped so high she banged her knees on the underside of her desk. As she rubbed the pain out of her legs, she saw that the cry had come from the sports section, where a good handful of reporters were bunched around the wireless, listening to the Cannons' game. Half the newsroom was scurrying over to the wireless now, and Eloise jumped up to join everyone. She could barely hear over their anxious voices.

"What happened?"

"Shh, listen!"

"Sounds like someone was hurt—"

"Hope it was Boomer."

"SHHH!"

A sober voice fuzzed through the transmission. "*Maureen Knight has experienced damage to her cranium and to her neck, and must recover fully before she plays another game—*"

"Not *KNIGHT!*"

"The Cannons are through. Through."

"It's a curse. A bloody curse."

"Bet Boomer did it, he's been responsible for fifteen of twenty injuries on opposing teams this season—"

"Yeah, and about ninety-five percent of their saves."

"Who are they going to get to replace her?"

"Doylan's the alternate, but he might as well be chasing Bludgers, for how good he is."

"Y'might as well pay up now, mate. Told you the Kestrels would come through."

"By way of *murder*, you raging arse?"

"I never said it would be easy."

Eloise stood on the peripheral of the group, listening hard for word on Knight. Cranium and neck injuries...sounded like she had taken a Bludger to the head, and Eloise wondered how she could possibly survive such a blow, or if she'd be permanently damaged because of it. Perhaps there was some research on injuries she could do to help out the sports section, who'd surely be forced to redesign and expand their coverage now that something so astounding had happened. At least there were still five hours until final deadline. She walked toward the sports desk, where Jim Scrynne, the front page editor, and Timothy Kramer, the sports editor, bowed their heads in conversation.

"Five more inches should do it; I'll contact our guy at the game let him know he's got two hundred and fifty more words," said Kramer. "And we'll need a backup piece on Knight and whoever's responsible for the hit."

Scrynne nodded, then looked up and saw Eloise standing in front of him. "Midgen, Features, yes?"

"I'm-yes."

"Five hundred words on Maureen Knight, can you have it ready in an hour?"

"Of course she can." Leon had stepped up behind Eloise before she could open her mouth to stutter. "Sweeney'll help with the backup. Go on," Leon urged, and Eloise turned away, dazed. She'd just got a front-page story. And it wasn't on Harry Potter.

"KRAMER? ARE YOU THERE?"

A frantic voice bellowed through a receiver on Kramer's desk; Kramer sprinted toward it, knocking over a few stacks of paper on the way.

"Go ahead McCall, we know about Knight, what else is going on over there?"

The entire newsroom had gone still; someone clicked off the wireless. They had to strain to hear the reporter over a growing roar in the background.

"IT'S BEDLAM-NO ONE KNOWS WHAT'S GOING ON-BOOMER HIT A BLUDGER TO KNIGHT'S HEAD, THE CANNONS ARE DEMANDING HE BE PUT DOWN-I'M GOING TO NEED TEN MORE INCHES! AT LEAST!"

"You've got them, it's going front page, what else is happening over there?"

"WAIT-OH BLOODY MERLIN, IS THAT-HEY, YOU, WAS THAT POTTER?"

"Potter? McCall, did you say Potter? What's this to do with Potter?"

"HARRY POTTER JUST WALKED ONTO THE PITCH-HE'S TALKING TO OLIVER WOOD-HE'S WHAT? HE'S SECOND RESERVE? KRAMER, POTTER IS SECOND RESERVE!"

"But he's not on the roster!" Kramer rummaged around on his desk and produced a thick stack of crumpled parchment; he flipped the cover back and Eloise caught sight of an orange logo with a large "C" on it. "McCall, he's not on the roster! What are they playing at?"

"HE'S NOT ON THE ROSTER!"

"You don't say! *Why* isn't he on the roster?"

"APPARENTLY THEY WERE TRYING TO KEEP IT FROM THE PRESS!"

Kramer snorted, and Eloise tried to stifle a giggle.

"HE'S GOING INTO THE CHANGING ROOM-YES, THE TEAM JUST TOOK HIM INTO THE CHANGING ROOM, LOOKS LIKE HE'S GOING TO BE PUT IN-THE FANS DON'T SEEM TO REALIZE IT-I'VE GOT TO GO-MAYBE YOU SHOULD MAKE IT TWENTY INCHES! I'LL CHECK IN LATER!"

The receiver clicked off. There was a beat of silence, and then the newsroom erupted.

"Where are my stats?"

"We need a new front page-hell, we need a new back page."

"Get me that fact sheet on fouls!"

"Get me coffee, *now*."

Eloise had never seen the *Prophet* like this, not even when the Weasley vs. Malfoy story had come in at near midnight. It was like Potter Central; everyone seemed to pull themselves off whatever they'd been doing, no matter how important the previous mission. Parchment flew through the air, reporters bandied reference books about, little-known trivia about Harry was regurgitated with lightning speed and frightening accuracy: exactly who his friends and relatives were, what he'd done in the war, how long it had been since he played Quidditch. Eloise even noticed, with no small measure of surprise, a packet passed around holding stats from Harry's Hogwarts games.

But she still didn't know what to do with herself. She had just been assigned a story, and she was already through her opening paragraph—a piece on Maureen Knight was an easy job for any decent Quidditch fan—but one look at the front-page editor's desk told her something else important was about to be decided. Leon, Scrynne and Kramer were having some sort of conference, and

instinct said not to go far. She rested her quill for a minute and listened.

"So we run McCall's game piece, and a feature on Potter."

"It'll be a miracle if we can get near him," said Wong. "He won't do post-game interviews like everyone else."

"I need to know whether to leave room for the story," said Scrynne, frowning at Leon. "Who can get it? Flummery?"

Leon *hmpfhed*. "One, she just did a story on Azkaban," he said, and grimaced, "and that's enough front-page time from her for a while. Two—no. Potter won't talk to her, especially after the Weasley article. And we need the human angle on this one. Don't send Flummery."

"Well, who have you got?"

"Midgen."

Eloise froze. This night was getting just a little out of hand. She couldn't deny she'd suspected they'd use her whenever Harry Potter did something spectacular, but now they were talking about sending her to the game, on deadline, to get an exclusive story reporters twice her age and experience couldn't get near. Showing up at Lupin Lodge was one thing; tackling Harry among a mob of friends, relatives, supporters, teammates, photographers, admirers, other reporters... Eloise gripped the underside of her desk with her free hand, hoping no one would notice if she passed out.

"She wrote that story about the wedding?"

"Yes, and the only interview we've got with Potter since the war."

"Right, I remember. And she's ready to get this story to us by eleven?"

Leon nodded, and something rose in Eloise's throat.

"Send Creevey with her."

"Creevey?"

"Photographer. Rather eager fellow."

"Right, right, whatever you think is best," said Scrynne.

"*MIDGEN! CREEVEY!*" Leon bellowed, and Eloise jumped again, and hit the tops of her knees on her desk, again. She hobbled over to the front-page desk, ignoring Prattleby's suspicious glare. The sooner she could get out of here the better; she had an urge to grab her quill and run before the rest of the newsroom found out that she'd been handed a story all of them would kill for.

Colin appeared at her side right before they reached the desk. "Took them long enough," he muttered with a grin.

"So. You two," said Leon, "are going to the game. Here." He handed them both rectangular lanyards that Eloise recognized as official press passes; he touched his wand to each and a glowing red version of the Daily *Prophet's* masthead began racing around the edges. "Check in every half hour, you can get me on this at any time. Don't worry about the game stats; McCall has that. Get me Potter, I want to know everything. Deadline at eleven."

"What about the Knight story?"

"Sweeney can take care of it," said Leon, and pointed toward a pale female reporter who'd been hired barely two weeks ago.

Eloise forced herself to stand up straight; a small crowd of reporters had gathered, each of them registering some form of unflattering surprise. Prattleby had his arms crossed and was making a face Eloise couldn't decipher.

"How many inches?" Eloise asked, forcing herself to sound cool and professional.

"As many as it takes."

She nearly staggered. That—that never happened—they never just made a story fit. At least, they hadn't with her stories, and for a moment Eloise felt like a real journalist. The *Prophet's* first string. The thought made her queasy.

Leon must have noticed her sudden change of expression, because he pulled her by the elbow and away from the rest of the group. "You're looking a little green," he whispered.

"I'm—I'm fine—I think—"

"Look, Midgen. *They*," he gestured to the other reporters, all of whom were undoubtedly trying to hear this exchange, "don't think you can do it. I do. So can you do it?"

"Y-Yes."

"That's my girl. Go, now, it's getting late. *CREEVEY!*" he shouted, temporarily rendering Eloise deaf.

Colin appeared at once.

"Go—now—don't waste more time."

"Come on, El," said Colin, and Eloise had just enough time to grab a quill and a few roles of

parchment from a nearby desk before Colin pulled her from the room by the sleeve of her robes. The last thing she saw before the door closed behind them was Prattleby, open jealousy contorting his face.

Then they ran.

By the time they had made it, panting, out of the Prophet building and out into the street, the walls of Diagon Alley were reverberating with the wireless transmission of the game. People hung out of their flat windows to listen as Lee Jordan's voice rung into the otherwise still air.

"RUMOR HAS IT HARRY POTTER IS GOING TO MAKE HIS PROFESSIONAL DEBUT."

"El, go on, Apparate, I'll run to the Leaky Cauldron to Floo—I'll meet you there in a minute."

Eloise nodded and shivered slightly.

"You're shivering—where's your cloak?"

"I-in the n-newsroom. But f-forget it, I've g-got to get there."

"Go ahead, go, I'll meet you there in five minutes," and without another word, Colin had sprinted back into building for her cloak.

She sent him silent thanks and watched him go, then took several deep breaths, trying to work out the stitch in her chest. She had to calm down; as nervous and excited and completely blown away she was about her assignment, history said far too many reporters got splinched on the job, and she was sure Harry wouldn't fancy speaking to one of her arms and perhaps a leg. If he talked to her at all.

He'll talk to you, he'll talk to you, she repeated to herself. She'd gone to extra measures to be fair whenever a story concerned him in the slightest, because she remembered all too well what that horrid Skeeter woman had done during her fifth year, and the consequences such biased coverage had wrought during her sixth and seventh. Poor Harry hadn't been able to do anything without being seen as a lunatic, and though Eloise's interactions with him were admittedly limited, she knew him to be nothing of the sort. He may hate the press as a rule, but he'd always been nice to her. He'd taken a chance and answered her questions once and, as she'd been told in a thank-you note from Hermione Granger, he'd been pleased with the article.

Harry would talk to her. She was sure. The big problem would be getting to him—but she'd figure that out later. Right now she just needed to stop her head from swimming. She'd turned out stories under tighter deadlines than this before. She knew about the Cannons and the Kestrels. She knew about Harry. She knew about Quidditch. She knew about Seeking. There was nothing to worry about. She was ready for this story.

She pulled her wand and focused on the pitch, and as the world around her went black she repeated her last thought like a mantra. She was ready for this story.

An earsplitting roar, so loud she thought she'd be thrown backward, greeted her arrival. She had Apparated right in front of the press tent, to be sure, but all around her was madness; wizards and witches were Apparating right on top of each other, stampeding for tickets, waving their orange pieces of parchment around as if they were strips of gold. The officials at the gate were fighting off the mob with well-placed repulsion spells, which forced the crowd into several straight, buzzing lines. Not ten feet in front of Eloise was a very large, burly man guarding the press entrance, surrounded by no less than a hundred bustling reporters and pushy photographers. And carrying over the tidal wave of sound whooshing out from the pitch was Lee Jordan's amplified voice: "RUMOR CONFIRMED! HARRY POTTER, SECOND RESERVE FOR THE CHUDLEY CANNONS, WILL BE PLAYING IN PLACE OF MAUREEN KNIGHT!" followed by a cheer so loud that nearby trees quivered.

She was not ready for this story.

"El, let's go!"

It was Colin, running to meet her from the pub down the lane. Eloise collected herself and jogged after him, right to the edge of the throng. She made a grab for her lanyard, which she had swung over her neck in the newsroom, and held it out to be ready for inspection.

"I'll take it from here, Midgen."

Eloise swung around to face a wall of a woman and a wiry, greasy man, both of them staring at her with unreserved disdain. Bleak hair hung lank against the woman's three-chinned neck, and weak, orange-red lips puckered in scorn. Her beady eyes, dull as dirt, pinned Eloise and her press pass right to the ground.

"F-Flummery," Eloise stuttered.

"Oh, you're a smart one. Come on, Peltier," she said crisply, jerking her neck toward the stadium so that her skin rattled. Peltier grunted and began to walk past.

Colin moved in front of them. "This is Eloise's story, *Nancy*," he growled.

"Undoubtedly," said Flummery sarcastically, drawing the word out like a weapon. "Poor, dear

Leon, having to send the *baby* in my place.” She shifted her eyes and raked Eloise over, and Eloise felt her jaw go rigid. “I’ll be taking that pass now, Missy. You can just scurry on back like a good little girl and tell Daddy the *professionals* have arrived.” She held out her bloated hand.

“No.” Eloise said it quietly, but with conviction, and Flummery narrowed her eyes to slits and took a step forward. Eloise didn’t care; she put her free hand up to stop Colin from coming between her and Flummery’s fat face. Another roar issued from the stadium, but it was unimportant. It was time a few things were said.

“Leon,” Eloise spat, her ears still ringing with Flummery’s taunt, “only puts *up* with you because as wretched and biased as your stories are, no one else is miserable enough to get them. One day, someone will find out how you get the horrible things you do. I cannot imagine whom you’ve bribed to avoid a libel charge, but I do know one thing—*one more* misstep and you are gone. Again. This is *our* story, Colin’s and mine, so you can just scurry on back yourself.”

Colin was mouthing wordlessly at her side, and Eloise had a brief moment of panic; she’d never come close to letting this much frustration go at once, and surely Colin thought she was a horrible, horrible person now that she had. But heat was rising in Flummery’s face, her eyes were darting around in panic, and her tiny mind was surely trying to think up a response. Eloise didn’t dare drop her guard. Something hostile and long-coming had been unleashed, and she could no longer control it; she thought of Harry, and how unfairly he’d been treated by people like Flummery, how hard his life, and the lives of countless other good people, had been made in the name of career advancement. As long as she was allowed to go unchecked, the entire wizarding world would—rightly—be scared of the press, and Eloise gazed at Flummery with hate in her eyes.

“When Leon finds out—” Flummery huffed, but Eloise had already anticipated her.

“Why don’t we ask him whose story this is?” asked Eloise innocently, holding up her press pass. “Yes, I think we’ll do that.” She touched her wand to the pass, muttered what she desperately hoped was the right spell, and the lettering still running around the edges turned green. She could hear the newsroom bustling, sounding twice as loud as it had when she left. She spoke into the top corner of the pass. “Oh, Leon? Leon?”

“Midgen? SHH—It’s Midgen, SHUT THAT THING OFF!” She could hear the newsroom go quiet. “Midgen? Where the hell are you?”

“I’m outside the stadium—I’ve run into Flummery, and it appears she’d like to...*help*...with my story.”

“YOU TELL FLUMMERY IF SHE GOES NEAR THAT GAME SHE IS FIRED! NOW GET YOUR BUM INSIDE THAT PITCH!”

“I’ll do that, Leon. Thanks.” Eloise tapped her pass again and smiled sweetly at Flummery, who was fuming purple. “Seems *Daddy* would rather I handle this one.”

For a moment, Eloise feared for her life. Flummery’s nostrils were white and her left eye started to twitch. She opened her mouth to speak, a movement that would have made Eloise flinch—except that it didn’t. Eloise kept her back ramrod straight and wordlessly dared Flummery to make another move.

“Let’s go, Peltier,” said Flummery slowly, but bitterly; without blinking or breaking eye contact, she backed away and Disapparated. Peltier cast Eloise a greasy once-over that made her ill, and then he too disappeared.

Eloise’s legs wavered beneath her. She put a hand to her stomach and exhaled several times before she realized Colin had not yet said anything. She turned to find him staring at her, shock elongating his features. He thought she was horrible.

“I’m sorry, Colin,” she said, and her whole body started to shake, “I’m not usually like that, oh I can’t believe I was so horrible, you must think I’m a terrible person—”

“That. Was. Amazing,” he said, and Eloise blushed and looked away.

“Oh.”

“No, really- *you* were am-”

“Colin! The game!” Eloise shouted, suddenly realizing that the ball had officially been released into play. She grabbed her cloak from Colin’s outstretched hand and flung it around herself, grateful for the burst of warmth, then tugged Colin by the elbow and urged him forward. Together they ran to the gate, which was now completely empty except for the one leering security wizard. Without pausing or breaking stride, they thrust out their press passes, barreled through the entrance and sprinted the rest of the way to the booth.

A wave of adrenaline, stronger than Eloise had ever felt, coursed through her. She had never been in this, no, any press box before, but the combination of elements were sliding comfortably into place. The roar of the crowd dimmed in her mind and her thoughts became a reel of facts: Seeking, Snitches, Harry. The fans chanting in unison, the vendors watching instead of selling, the mascot

Cannonball rolling madly down aisles, grown men hugging each other, parents hoisting their kids onto their heads, orange sparklers flaring in the darkening air; Eloise filed it all in her head, took it all in, knew she didn't need to write it down—she swelled at the sheer volume of humanity at her fingertips, and filled with pride to realize this was a story she could write, and write well.

But she scribbled notes as they ran, just in case.

"Passes."

This guard was twice as large at the last, but Eloise was already feeling like an old pro at the show-your-pass game, and held her card up defiantly. Colin snickered as the guard grunted and stepped aside.

"What?" she asked, risking a small smile as Colin turned and walked backwards to enter the box.

"Nothing, you're just too-oof!" Colin had backed right into a wall of people, and Eloise snapped back into focus to find herself in the most crowded box she'd ever seen. Not only wasn't there a seat to be had, but there were no seats; someone must have magically removed the chairs to make room for all the extra press. Lightbulbs popped at alternate seconds, so that it was like being in the middle of a lightning storm. She couldn't even see the game; some reporters had taken to writing blindly above their heads, probably for want of space, blocking out almost everything. Their voices clamored together as if coming from one large insect.

"DE GOODE'S GOT DE QUAFFLE!"

Except for one. Lee Jordan, looking every bit as ruddy and enthusiastic as he had during Hogwarts games, danced around at the top of the box, where a small space had been cleared for him. He jumped and punched his microphone into the air between comments.

As funny and familiar as it was to see Lee back in action, panic started to sweep over Eloise. She and Colin were still standing on the outside of the crowd, trying to gauge the situation; from the look of it, she'd never get to see anything. She imagined herself slumping back into the newsroom, emptyhanded, and Prattleby's victorious face. "Better luck next time, eh?"

Something snatched her wrist, and her body bent forward.

"Colin, what are you doing?"

Colin rammed into the solid crowd, shoulder first, like a bull.

"Oh, right." Eloise grasped his wrist back, enforcing the connection; the others yelped and cursed but grudgingly gave way as they dug through.

"Oh, sorry-ow-sorry-didn't mean-oh, are you okay?-whoops, sorry there—"

Colin barreled unforgivingly. With a hundred journalists there to do the job usually assigned to five or six, the box had probably filled up far before anyone had thought to magically expand it. The cold December air was now full of statistics and sweat, Eloise crinkled her nose against both. A hairy arm swung out from their left and Colin ducked, taking Eloise with him, making her feel as if she was playing Quidditch herself.

The air cleared. Eloise took a long, grateful swig of it and shifted as best she could to thank Colin. He had carved out a miniscule spot from which they could see the game perfectly; it might even have been comfortable, if the two of them weren't so smushed together. But then Colin leaned back to take his first shot of the game, sliding right against Eloise's shoulder. He smelled of musk. She grinned goofily at her feet, thinking perhaps she was comfortable enough for a while.

Orange and green blurs were racing up and down the field; Eloise squinted just in time to see someone—Harry—plow in front of a Kestrel, and a second later the crowds exploded as Firoza Newland scored for the Cannons.

"EXCELLENT CHASING BY NEWLAND!"

Eloise made a quick mental note of the save, then tried to zone out the other reporter's comments and focus on Harry. It was a difficult thing.

"Don't know how she does it, at her age"

"Like I said, eyes in the back of her head. She's a mother."

"What's her score ratio again?"

"Seven to one!" someone shouted from the other end of the box.

"CHEERS FOR THAT!"

"YES, IT'S HARRY POTTER'S PROFESSIONAL DEBUT," shouted a familiar, yet different, voice and Eloise twisted as much as she could to chance another glimpse at the top of the box. Skip Fetterman, the stadium's floodlights glaring off his precise haircut and tortoise-rimmed glasses, had joined Lee in commentating, and Lee wasn't looking too happy about it. Eloise had heard them do play-by-plays together once before, and it hadn't been pretty; Skip's stuffed-shirt broadcaster training clashed heavily with Lee's all-get-out verve for the game. Tonight's pairing was only going

to make things a more chaotic, if that was even possible.

Eloise tried to turn back and almost didn't succeed; she grasped the railing and blinked against flashing lights while Colin snapped an insane amount of photos. She couldn't even get at her scroll; the weight of the crowd was pushing against her and cold metal was digging into her ribs. Occasionally, the mob shifted to follow play, and Eloise felt her entire body move with it; once, she thought her feet actually left the ground.

The next thing she felt, though, was definitely not at her feet.

"You're a pretty little colt, ain't ya?"

The stocky man next to Eloise nudged her with his shoulder and dealt her bum a hard pinch that stung through her cloak and robes. Eloise felt her jaw drop and stared straight forward for a while before she dared to turn, open-mouthed, and face the perpetrator. A man she immediately recognized as Buck Atkins, the American reporter she'd so often heard about in the newsroom, smiled lecherously from behind a grey mustache. She knew he was on special assignment, sent to every game from the *Texas Portent* to follow Jack DeGoode's cross-Atlantic career. Famous as he was for his wit and sharp writing, Eloise thought she'd rather admire his style from afar.

"Now don't look so shocked there, Missy, an ol' cowpoke like me's still got some life, even enough for your young-" he licked his lips and sucked a breath, "type." And before she could stop it, Buck Atkins had placed his hand around her on her left hip, just above her bum.

Eloise tried to move out of his grip but there was nowhere to go; she made as loud a noise of protest as she could muster.

Colin turned around. He glanced once at Eloise's pleading face and then his eyes dropped downward, traveling back up the length of Atkins's arm, fury building in his eyes.

"Move. Now."

The crowd around them made a loud, desperate groan—something wild was going on, she could vaguely hear the disappointment in the stands—but Eloise couldn't tear her eyes away from Colin, and the way his chin had gone dangerously still. His camera hung forgot at his side, which Eloise took as a serious compliment. She was sure she was blushing.

Atkins laughed. "Now there's what I like to see, a young man ready to defend his 'lassie'."

Colin hadn't budged. "Move your hand."

"Look at that," Atkins leaned in to whisper in Eloise's ear, "sounds like someone roped this boy in good and—"

Good and what, Eloise never found out. Colin had reached around Eloise and grabbed Atkins by the collar, pulling him back just for enough to dislodge the offending hand and send Eloise scurrying to Colin's left side. Colin immediately pressed into the space Eloise had vacated.

Atkins laughed even harder. "That's the way to do it! I like you, boy!"

Colin wound back with his free hand, and Eloise pulled her wand as fast as she could—she couldn't let Colin get thrown out of the game on her account, and worse, she couldn't let Atkins retaliate. She pointed her wand, cried, "*Petrificus Totalus*," and Atkins immediately went rigid.

It was enough to make Colin take notice and drop his hand; she couldn't see his face, but she could see his shoulders start shaking. When he turned, he was smiling widely, perhaps even fighting back a laugh. No one seemed to notice that Atkins had been immobilized, and Eloise was hardly surprised. She heard Lee and Skip bantering about a Wronski Feint, and guessed no one in the box had even witnessed the exchange.

But Colin was still smiling like that, making it impossible to turn back to the game. They were almost toe-to-toe, and for a brief second Eloise wondered how silly they must look from the outside, with everyone in their box screaming and jumping and watching the game, and the two of them staring at each other instead.

"Thanks," she said, trying to smile as widely as he was. She got halfway there but lost her nerve and gave the rest of the expression to her shoes. Blue shoes.

Colin's shoes moved closer, and she felt his breath against her ear. "You Hufflepuffs are damn fast. That was perfect."

Eloise giggled, and her head floated again.

"AND IT'S COLE KERRY TO THE HOOPS AGAIN, SHE IS JUST A MACHINE, WATCH THIS WOMAN GO!"

Eloise jumped, bumping the top of her head against Colin's chin.

"Oh! I'm going to kill you one of these days! But the game!" She whirled round to face the pitch, and so did Colin, still rubbing his chin and laughing, just in time to see Kerry swoop effortlessly past the Kestrels' keeper for a goal.

"YES, LEE, SHE'S CERTAINLY BEEN THIS LEAGUE'S BIGGEST FIND, AND YOU'VE GOT TO

WONDER WHY IT TOOK SO LONG FOR ANYONE TO NOTICE HER CHASER ABILITIES.”

“IT DIDN’T TAKE SO LONG, SKIP, IT JUST TOOK A MADMAN NAMED WOOD.”

“WELL HE’S CERTAINLY MAD IF HE THINKS PUTTING IN A COLD SEEKER IS ANY KIND OF WAY TO—OH, WHAT’S POTTER DOING? HE’S DIVING, HE’S—”

Eloise grasped the railing and bent over the edge, watching the flawless, easy way Harry cut through the air as he soared downward. His robes flew out behind him and he was like an arrow, one beautifully straight line pelting down the pitch. She’d never seen anyone as meant for anything as Harry seemed for Quidditch, and remembered feeling the same way at Hogwarts. It was one thing about him the war hadn’t touched.

It didn’t even matter that he missed. It didn’t matter to Eloise that he hadn’t caught a Snitch, or that there hadn’t been a Snitch to catch, or whatever the ruckus was about. She watched Harry fly and found herself with an angle.

But that was the last time she was able to see Harry clearly for a while. As the game rolled ahead she found she was getting a surprisingly small amount of material for her story; it was all Blatching, Stodging, ploys and feints. She didn’t need to know that Abbie Friar could no longer pull off a decent Starfish and Stick, or that Knight was favored to replace Holgate on the English team later in the year. The endless relay of statistics were jumbling her thoughts, making it impossible to focus on what kind of questions she needed to ask Harry, when the game ended.

And if the game ends right now, how am I going to get to him? she thought, suddenly panicked. Harry had just dove after what he thought was a Snitch; what if the real Snitch showed up in the next five minutes? Now? It was a long way from here to the ground, and it would take a miracle to cut through the post-game crowd with any sort of ease. Though she was sure her press pass could get her into the usual press conference, later on in the stadium’s press room, that wasn’t going to be much help when it came to Harry.

And Leon wanted the human angle. There was no way she was going to get it from up here. She tugged at Colin’s elbow, and a flash of light exploded in her face.

“Whoops, sorry,” he said.

“It’s okay. Colin, I think this might sound crazy, but we have to leave.”

“Leave? We can’t just—”

“Not the game. This box. I can’t focus, I’m not here for the same type of story—McCall’s in here somewhere for that.” She was yelling, but she was sure Colin was hearing her. “I need to be—”

She stopped, and followed her pointing hand to the lowest partition in the stadium, where, just visible against the wall nearest the pitch, several dots with bright red hair were jumping up and down. “THERE! Colin, it’s the Weasleys! THERE! We need to be THERE!”

Colin didn’t even look to check. “You’re right.” He grabbed her wrist and tugged Eloise back through the crowd, a maneuver that was considerably easier than getting to the front had been. They stopped behind everyone else to catch their breath, Colin to refill his camera for the sixth or so time. Eloise looked up at Lee.

“WHAT A DELIBERATE FOUL! LOOKS LIKE SOMEONE’S GETTING WORRIED, SKIP!”

“AND FOR NO GOOD REASON LEE, IF THE SNITCH COMES OUT BEFORE THE CANNONS HAVE MANAGED ANOTHER TEN GOALS—AND IT’S LIKELY THAT IT WILL—THEN THE KESTRELS ARE PRACTICALLY A SHOE-IN FOR THE WIN.”

Lee seemed to forget he was holding a microphone and turned to face Skip full on. “OH, IS THAT SO?”

“YES, THAT’S—”

Lee grabbed Skip’s microphone and pitched it over the back of the box. Eloise laughed.

Colin’s camera snapped shut, and he and Eloise took off again, running at top speed down several flights of stairs, Lee’s uproarious and uninterrupted comments bouncing off the cement walls. No one was around—not a vendor, not a guard—to stop them as they entered at the ground level. Everyone must have been watching the game, and Eloise was struck again by what a huge story she had been assigned. Colin led her straight to the front without incident; no one nearby was willing to take their eyes off the game long enough to inspect their press passes with any kind of scrutiny. Or discover they weren’t tickets.

Three carrot-topped figures were nearly scaling the wall that separated the pitch from the stands, and Eloise and Colin ran toward them as if they were beacons. As they got closer, Eloise recognized them as Fred, George and Ginny, surrounded by Professor Lupin, Sirius Black and Angelina Johnson—no, Angelina Weasley. Eloise’s heart thudded with relief. But where was Ron?

“THAT’S RIGHT HARRY, YOU GET HIM, SHOW THAT PONCY LEPRECHAUN PRAT HOW TO DO IT!”

There was Ron. He was screaming like a lunatic from above and behind, loud enough for the entire stadium to hear, next to a squat, bald man who was doing the same. Eloise made a note to double-check her hunch that Ron had tickets to the game from the off, while the rest of the family showed up when they heard Harry was playing.

And they *were* like a family, Eloise thought warmly as they skidded to a halt behind the orange blurs that were the Weasleys. A very big, happy one who'd run out at a moment's notice to support one of their own, blood brother or not.

Some sort of explosion happened in the stands; all of a sudden everyone was on their feet, leaning left, and Eloise squinted up just in time to see Adam Holgate tearing downward with half Harry's grace, bolting after a small, glittering item. Harry pivoted in the air and tore after, and Eloise fought the urge to scream for Harry to tear Holgate's arms off.

"TEAR HIS ARMS OFF, HARRY!" yelled Colin, almost dropping his camera. Being around so many Gryffindors again seemed to be going to Colin's head. Eloise welcomed the nostalgia. She almost expected to look into the top box and see Dumbledore cheering Harry on.

But Holgate was close, and Harry was flying desperately, faster than Eloise had ever seen him go. She dug her fingernails into her cheeks.

THWACK!

"YEAHAHAHAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!"

It was one long, simultaneous Weasley shout, and Eloise exhaled. The game wasn't over, thanks to Marty Gudgeon and Medusa Francis' deadly execution of a textbook Doppbeater Defense. The Weasleys grabbed each others' limbs and jumping up and down as one ecstatic unit.

Except for two of them. Sirius Black and Remus Lupin stood to the side of their group, Black's hands in such tight fists that white knuckles showed through the skin. They both stared upward as if in some sort of trance, and Black looked to be fighting a swell of emotion. His eyes were bright as he watched his godson.

The teams pulled back for the called foul, and Colin sneaked up behind Ginny, whose hands were buried in her hair, pulling at either side of her face. Colin snapped a picture of her profile, and she swung around.

"COLIN!" she screamed, and hugged him. "Did you see? Of course you saw!" she yelled, looking up and down between Colin and the game. "Isn't it wonderful? He's—oh—YEAH OLIVER! NO GOAL!—we heard it on the wireless and ran here, they were almost out of tickets, and, Eloise! Hi! Hey, wait, are you two here—"

"On assignment, yes," answered Eloise, smiling at how different Ginny looked from the last time she saw her. She was shining, her face flushed with unabashed love, and all of it was very clearly for Harry. Even at the wedding she had not looked this open; gone was the practiced, guarded expression Ginny had worn all throughout Hogwarts, and Eloise thought it a welcome change.

"Ooh, they gave you *this* story? Good for you, Eloise!" said Ginny, and Eloise knew she meant it.

"Yes, but we sort of need to, you know," she bit her lip, looked at Ginny's questioning but happy face and decided to just come out with it. "We need to speak to Harry. After the game, that is."

Ginny tutted. "Of course you do! Just stick to me after he catches that Snitch. I'm sure he'll talk to you."

Relief so complete swept over Eloise she thought her knees would buckle. "Oh, thanks, Ginny. Really."

Ginny *tsked* again, then patted Colin on the shoulder and whirled back to the pitch.

Colin was grinning.

"What?"

"Nothing. It just took me six years to get Harry to let me take his picture, that's all. Six months, and you've got exclusives."

"Oh shh, I haven't got anything yet."

"Right," said Colin, still grinning, and he hoisted his camera toward the game again.

It was easily the fastest and most brutal minutes of Quidditch Eloise had ever seen. Harry flew steadily above it, blanketing the pitch in a swirl of speedy orange. So many things were happening at once Eloise was sure she was missing something vital; she scribbled a few tactics that she was able to spot, but she only needed a few major points for reference in her story, if necessary. She needed the basics, but the important basics, and she didn't trust herself to come up with the right comparisons so quickly; she needed an outside voice, someone who knew Quidditch better than any other fan, and well enough to read between the maneuvers...someone who used to be a team captain....

Eloise positioned herself behind Angelina Johnson-Weasley.

"Ooh, that was a great Backbeat." Angelina pointed at a dot Eloise could just make out as Medusa Francis. "She has such grace."

Fred, standing next to her, snorted. "Grace my arse, she should have taken his head off."

"Honestly, I can't believe what Oliver's done with this team. That—that right THERE! Just a *perfect* reverse pass, I've never seen a team have such precision, it's astounding, it really is."

"It's not so astounding," put in George right after Firoza Newland had looped around Hollwedel and under Boomer for yet another Cannons goal, "considering Oliver's actually getting *paid* to do what he did to us at Hogwarts. I'm just surprised no one's died of bloody exhaustion."

Eloise stood for nearly fifteen minutes, scribbling notes on the Weasleys' talk and keeping one eye on Harry as the Cannons rocketed to near invincibility. Angelina's tendency to point to the widest angle possible was far more helpful than the mad volley of statistics up in the press box, and Eloise allowed part of her mind to wander as she took notes, making herself a mental list of questions to ask Harry.

Kestrel Keeper Abbie Friar was looking worse for wear now, and goal after goal soared past her helpless tending, making the crowd around Eloise thunder and the ground beneath her tremble.

Harry lurched forward toward something Eloise couldn't see—then stopped just as abruptly. Ginny threw out an arm and grabbed Fred's jumper.

"Fred, what's he doing?" asked Ginny. "What's going on up there?"

Harry had flown toward Oliver and the two of them seemed to be having a heated conference near the hoops while the game raged at the opposite end of the pitch. Fred squinted.

"Dunno, Gin—only time Oliver ever stopped to talk during a game was to tell one of us off."

Harry suddenly flattened himself to his broom and took off like a shot, screaming backward to a stunned-looking Oliver. Ginny sucked in a breath and brought her hands up in fists.

"He's after it," she said simply. Eloise scribbled.

"YEAH, HARRY! IT'S YOURS!" came Ron's voice. As two slipstreams on brooms zoomed toward the center of the pitch, the drone in the stands grew to a feverish buzz, then to a deafening roar. Eloise's entire body thrilled; she could see Colin working his camera so hard that it began to smoke in places other than the flash. She dropped her hands to her sides and clenched her robes, her notes forgot in the unbelievable rush that was the last few seconds of a Quidditch match.

Colin dropped his camera on its strap and took hold of Eloise's forearm, his knuckles white against her now-flushed skin.

She threw objectivity to the wind.

"GET IT, HARRY!" she shouted, surprised at her own volume. Colin jumped, a little, and looked down at her with a smirk. Eloise smiled back, but only for a second, because Harry and Holgate were neck-and-neck, two reckless blurs of speed, their little golden prize trapped between them. Eloise's heart lurched with the hope that Harry would get to the tiny, surrounded Snitch first. One more second—they were equal distances apart from the winking gold speck, closing in at matching speeds and—if they kept going like that they'd surely—

CRUNCH!

It might have been pure imagination, but Eloise could swear she heard the sickening crush of shattering bones as Harry and Holgate slammed into each other. She heard it over and over and over again, thinking she might be sick with it, her head ringing and her arm painful in Colin's grip.

Holgate, his entire face covered in blood, slumped wholly against his broom, which was lucky; the Firebolt immediately kicked into emergency mode, spinning away from the crash and wafting his bleeding, bruised form gently toward the ground.

But Harry was still floating in the air, performing what any broomstick would take to be a decent Starfish and Stick. One arm hung limply at around the shaft of the broom while the other was rigid, making an awkward angle with his body. The one leg that looped the bristles of his broom gave way and he hung, the sudden, lopsided shift of weight causing him to spin out toward the stands. The other Cannons were rushing toward him but it didn't do much good; he swirled to a stop and though his Firebolt seemed to have got the hint, starting a slow float to the ground, Harry's fingers finally uncurled, one by one. He released the broom.

"*Lentes!*" shouted Oliver, and Harry's limp form instantly slowed, hitting the ground with only a slightly upsetting *thud*.

There was a split second of silence in which Ginny, her face like ash, made a dry, rattling sort of sound. Then the crowd started up again, humming at first but quickly working themselves into frenzy; they were streaming down from the top boxes, pushing against those at the bottom level for a look at the field. Flashes of light exploded everywhere, though Colin made no move toward his camera. The mediwizards had already rushed onto the field, where all the Cannons and Kestrel

players had landed and were standing helplessly by their fallen teammates.

"Out of my way—out of my—oh, hell, *move*—" There was a great *thump*, and next second Ron Weasley had appeared next to Ginny, wide-eyed and horrified, and silently took her hand.

Ginny suddenly nodded, as if she had made a decision. In one swift, businesslike movement, she hoisted herself over the barrier and onto the pitch. Ron followed instantly, and the two of them ran.

"Well, come on!" shouted George, and the rest of the Weasleys hopped the gate.

Eloise wasted no time; as loathe as she was to take advantage of Harry's unconscious—or worse—state, she had to stick to the Weasleys, just in case. Colin jumped the barrier with ease and held out his hand to help Eloise over; they ducked the first onset of security wizards putting up wards to stop people from doing exactly what they had just done, and ran to catch up with Ginny.

"Get back now, all of you," said a lumpy official to the group of Weasleys that had surrounded him. "Only team members and mediwizards—back to the pitch, come on now." The guard took a look at Ginny, who had planted her feet in the ground and was sending him darts with her eyes, and did a doubletake. "Hey wait a minute—you all, you're the minis—"

"We are *family* of Harry Potter's," said Sirius quietly, but with lethal intonation. "And we're going to see him."

The man saw Sirius and visibly jumped. "Right, yes, of course, Mr. Black, go on, go on." And he shuffled off, half-bowing.

Harry and Holgate, both bloodied beyond recognition, lay deathly quiet on the grass. Ginny yelped and lurched herself forward; Professor Lupin gently—but firmly—held her back by the shoulders.

"No, Ginny."

"But," said Ginny, her voice full of tears, "but Remus *look* at him—I *have* to—they don't know what they're doing—Harry—oh Harry—"

No sooner had she said the words than Harry stirred; he appeared to be trying to turn his head. "Ginny?" he said weakly. "You're...here?"

"Yes, of course," she sighed, and a tear started down her cheek. "I heard your name on the wireless and came right up—but they won't let me in there and oh, you're talking—thank god—I thought—"

She was crying fully now, and Ron came up beside her and tapped Professor Lupin, who stepped back. Ron took Ginny's hand. "Shh, Ginny, it's all right."

A mediwizard bustled over Harry, obstructing the view. Ron and Ginny stayed close, Ron's hand making small circles against the spot between Ginny's shoulders.

"Leprechaun gold! Never, in all my years, leprechaun gold on this pitch!" someone shouted, and Eloise pivoted to see the Kestrels' Tim Boomer standing sheepishly in front of an irate league official, his pockets hanging out of his robes.

"SUSPENDED!" shouted the official, evoking a chorus of groans and curses from the Kestrels that made the official's face an even brighter shade of red. "INDEFINITELY! *At least* for the rest of the season, and I'll be taking your case up with the League, see if we can't make it longer!"

Boomer's curses fell deaf on the orange roar that was the Cannons. Oliver looked as if he'd bust, seeming to forget, for the moment, that he was two Seekers down and the game had yet to be called, or even postponed.

"I caught it—I caught it—Oliver—where's Oliver Wood?"

It was Harry, half passed-out on his stretcher. His left hand extended high above him, and glints of silver extruded from his palm. Eloise sucked a breath, and she was not alone; the Weasleys froze, gripping each others' robes.

The silver glints trembled, like trapped wings.

"Yeah, Harry!" yelled Ron, who had jumped so high he nearly knocked Ginny to the ground. Eloise nearly tripped over her own robes to follow Ginny, who had run after the stretcher, Colin snapping pictures at her heels.

Oliver's mouth was hanging open; he had to be pushed forward by his teammates. When he got to Harry, he just looked at the Snitch, and then back down at the Seeker who had saved his season.

"I knew you would," he choked. Eloise could barely write his quote through her tears, and somewhere to her right, Colin was jumping around like a madman, taking pictures faster than she'd ever seen him try.

"AND HE'S GOT IT! HARRY POTTER'S DONE IT AGAIN! HARRY POTTER CATCHES THE SNITCH WITH A PERFECTLY EXECUTED PLUMPTON PASS—"

"PERFECTLY EXECUTED, LEE? THAT'S AN ACCIDENT IF I EVER—"

"HARRY POTTER EXECUTES A TEXTBOOK PLUMPTON PASS, AND THE GAME IS OVER! THE CANNONS REMAIN UNDEFEATED!"

"*WE SHALL CON-QUER! WE SHALL CON-QUER!*"

The cheer started low, on the field with the Cannons, and then worked upward until the entire stadium rocked with the sound. The press had broken the wards and started to stream onto the field. Tears clouded Eloise's eyes, and her notes, at the beginning of the night so orderly and legible, were now nothing more than haphazard scribbles tearing across crumpled parchment. She was trying to record everything—the crush of the crowd, the celebratory (orange) fireworks, the way tears were falling freely from Ron Weasley's eyes—but to write any of it down meant looking away or at least dividing her attention, and that was not an option.

The stretchers bearing the unconscious Seekers rose and started floating toward the teams' bunkers; Eloise and Colin immediately ran to the front of the crowd, keeping close to Ron. Ginny, on Ron's right, walked quietly, her bloodshot eyes ever focused on Harry's quiet form. Sirius and Remus stayed close as well, though neither of them had yet said a thing. A squadron of mediwizards surrounded the stretchers, making movement toward the changing rooms very slow business, but also preventing the rest of the press from getting too close to the Cannons, Kestrels or Weasleys. *Or me and Colin*, Eloise realized, struck by the bizarre confluence of events that had pushed her ahead of all the other reporters.

The door to the changing rooms swung open and the two stretchers floated through, followed by the legion of mediwizards; the Weasleys, starting with Ron, moved to enter as well, but the door slammed shut, and the same lumpy guard that had tried to stop them from running to the pitch stepped in front of the door

"CAPTAINS ONLY! I SAID CAPTAINS ONLY!"

"No!" shouted Ginny. "But that's my—we're family!"

"I SAID CAPTAINS—" the guard glanced sidelong at Sirius and quivered, "—only. Sorry, miss. Sir. Captains only."

Oliver Wood and Kyle Kirkpatrick maneuvered to the front, glaring at each other out of the corners of their eyes. The guard shifted away to let them through, then slid right back in front as the door slammed once more. The crowd groaned.

"Go on, Angelina, you're a captain," prodded Fred. "She's a captain!" he shouted, pointing atop Angelina's head. "Bossed me around for a whole year!"

"Was, and at *Hogwarts*, you git," Angelina muttered.

"Oh, she's still captain," George whispered to Eloise. "But not on the pitch."

Ginny stared forlornly at the closed door while Ron swore under his breath.

Eloise was starting to lose hope. The way it looked, no one was getting in to see Harry. She scrolled through her notes, frantically looking for a way to spin the story with what she'd gleaned in the stands.

Nothing. There was nothing. Her article was going to have to feature Harry Potter's family watching him play Quidditch. She let out an impatient whimper. Leon was going to be so disappointed.

"MIDGEN!?"

Eloise's heart dropped. Her press pass was glowing. She brought it to her mouth and stuck a finger in an ear.

"Y-y-YES, LEON?"

"You didn't check in! What's happening?"

"NOTHING—I'M WAITING...TO...GET INTO THE CHANGING ROOM," she fibbed.

"Oh, good show, Midgen, let me know when you've got that interview."

"Harry's, um...injured!" Eloise added, panicking for a distraction.

"Can he talk?"

"Er..." *No no no no no no no no* "Yes."

"Great! See you in a bit!"

The pass clicked off. Eloise looked at it sadly. Colin shifted his camera bag on his shoulder and offered a sympathetic nod.

"But I *liked* my job," Eloise sighed.

Colin laughed and nudged her in the shoulder. "You won't be fired."

"Fired?"

Ron Weasley was standing there, his eyes bright and red, his face full of worry. "You're not getting sacked, are you?"

"Not yet," said Eloise, and smiled at Ron. "But it doesn't matter. You're all right? And Ginny?"

"Yeah, it's not like we're not used to this by now." He laughed softly and shoved his right hand in his pocket, leaving his left clenched at his side. "You're here for work?"

Colin nodded. "Congratulations on being cleared, by the way," said Colin. "We knew those charges were ridiculous."

Ron smiled. "That might not have happened, without your help," he said. "Thanks. Really. Both of you. And thanks for Hermione, too, because if she were here I'd have to pry her off you two."

"How is she?" asked Eloise. "She's with the Thinker, right?"

"Yep. Still absolutely crazy, you know her. Studying, as if she hasn't had enough school. She'll be home around Christmas." Ron sighed a little, then seemed to realize he'd done it out loud. His ears went pink and Eloise bit back a giggle.

"I'd love to do a story on her," said Eloise. "There's a lot of confusion about what Thinkers actually do. And a lot of people at the paper wonder what Hermione Granger is doing with herself."

"Okay. But listen, you're not really getting fired are you?"

"No," laughed Eloise, feeling silly for even suggesting it. "I was just being stupid. Don't worry."

Ron gave her a suspicious look, but whatever he said next was drowned out by the buzz of the crowd behind them; a mediwizard had stepped out of the stadium and was having a quiet word with the guard, who then stepped to the left of the door and opened it a crack.

"TEAMMATES! TEAMS ONLY!" he said, but the push of the crowd was too much for him. The door was instantly thrown open all the way and Eloise was carried through on the mob's momentum, vaguely aware that Colin was near and the Weasleys were just ahead.

The noise increased tenfold upon encountering the echoing path to the Cannons' area; with the popping, flashing and pounding of feet, Eloise felt as though she was trapped in a tidal wave. Ron and Ginny were still holding hands, and almost skidded to a stop in front of the medical wing; Eloise stayed as close as she could get to Ginny, and made sure Colin was right in step. They had no sooner reached the door to the wing when Oliver slipped out and crossed his arms over his burly chest.

"GET BACK!" he shouted, blocking the door with his body. "NO PRESS! TEAM MEMBERS ONLY! OH ALL RIGHT, YOU TOO," he conceded, flicking his eyes over the hopeful faces of the Weasleys. "YES, AND YOU, AND YOU, GO ON, QUICKLY NOW, GO-" He waved the redheaded group through, but just as Ginny was about to enter, a reporter from the Manchester *Mage* tried to duck under Oliver's arm, causing Oliver to step away just enough to pick the man up and throw him across the hall.

It was just enough of a distraction. Eloise saw Ron grab Colin's arm just before she felt herself pulled forward; Ginny had taken hold of her robes. "Come on. You're with me," she whispered, and steered Eloise right into the hospital ward.

"Ginny, *thank you*," Eloise breathed as they were shunted inside the cool, dark room, but Ginny was no longer next to her; she had run over to the beds, which were already surrounded by the brightly uniformed Cannons.

The door clicked shut behind them, cutting off a chorus of disappointed groans. No one else would get in. Eloise thought she might laugh, she was so happy. Harry would talk to her. She had an exclusive. Leon was going to be so proud. Prattleby was going to have to shut his mouth, for once. And Flummery was going to *die*.

While the Cannons grouped around Harry, offering congratulations and replaying the game's final minutes, a female voice whimpered from the bed on the right. Oliver rushed over to it. Maureen Knight was trying to raise herself up on one elbow and failing miserably; each time she tried, she fell back to the bed and screwed up her face in pain. Her pallid skin contrasted sharply with the bruises that had bloomed around each eye, and she was shooting resentful glances at a cross-looking mediwizard looming above her.

"Sam, I'm fine, let me get up."

"I'll tell you when you're fine, Knight. Now *down*. Rest."

"How is she, Sam?" asked Oliver. He had put a hand next Knight's head, and was speaking softly for the first time Eloise had ever heard. "She's talking, she's up, so she can't be too bad, but how're her bones?"

"I'll be....fine..." said Knight, struggling to sit up again. "I'll be ready for our next game, I'll be back in practice tomorrow, I swear-"

"That's not what I meant, lunatic, and you're not practicing tomorrow," said Oliver. "Now lie down or I'll have Sam sedate you."

"Not fair," Knight muttered but Eloise could swear she saw her smile at Oliver. Eloise had to stop from smiling, herself. Now *there* was something she hadn't known about Maureen Knight.

"Still can't believe you caught it, Harry," a ruddy Firoza was saying.

"I didn't, you know," came a weak voice whose owner Eloise couldn't see. "I mean, it just went up my...it doesn't, you know, *count*."

"Oh it COUNTS," Oliver barked, making Knight jump.

Colin was on his tiptoes, trying to see over the head of the nearest Cannon for a look at Harry; Eloise just readied her quill and checked the time. Almost nine. She'd have an hour to write this story—*this* story—at most. She crossed her hands in front of her to try and stop them from shaking.

"Hey—what's that?—No press!" Harry protested, and Eloise could see why; Colin was edging his camera through the wall of Cannons in front of him.

"It's just me, Harry!" said Colin, sounding much younger than he had all night. "I won't take a picture if you'd rather."

Harry laughed softly. "Oh, hi, Colin. It's fine. Go ahead." Colin flashed instantly. "Where's Eloise?"

Eloise jumped. "Right here, Harry," she said, raising her arm so he could see. A few Cannons shifted so she could move forward, and she got her first glimpse at Harry; the whole right side of him was battered, and he was pale as death, but a small smile curved at his mouth. "When you have a minute."

Harry nodded.

"We sneaked Colin and Eloise in with us," said Ginny, who stood against the wall nearest to Harry's head and looked as if she was fighting to keep herself away. "I hope you don't mind, but I thought since they're our friends—"

"No, it's good," said Harry.

Harry shut his eyes and winced, and Ginny instantly put her hands up, as if to touch him. But she seemed to check herself, and with a sidelong glance at Professor Lupin, she slid back into place along the wall. Eloise was just wondering what that was all about when Harry spoke again.

"How did you get here?" he said to Ginny.

"Floo powder," said Ginny. "Barely in time, too. There was a rush on tickets once people heard you were playing—we almost didn't get ours."

"We?" Harry opened his eyes. The Cannons had drifted over to Knight's bedside, leaving the room for the rest of the Weasleys to gather round. Harry's eyes widened in faint shock. "You all..."

"Wouldn't've missed it, Harry!" exclaimed Fred. "Oliver's still got you running suicide missions."

"At least he's consistent, eh, Harry?" laughed George.

"Bloody Boomer," growled Angelina. "They should just kick him out of the league. Full stop. All this suspension business—look what he did to Knight, and the dirty trick he played on you! Bastard. You all right, Harry?"

Harry nodded, and his eyes glistened in the lamplight. Eloise was slightly taken aback, and her heart ached, a little. She'd always known Harry to be nice, polite, standoffish in the way you'd expect a hero of his kind to be. But she'd never known he was so emotional, and so, well, sweet; he looked at his friends as if they had just brought him the greatest gift in the world, and all they had done was show up. But then, according to what Eloise knew of Harry's childhood, perhaps showing up was enough.

"You've certainly come up since your third year," Professor Lupin said dryly, stepping up to the bed. "Very nice playing, Harry."

Harry laughed. He managed a soft, "Thanks," before Sirius Black moved into view, his eyes shining like silver. Harry fell silent.

It was a long moment before anyone breathed. "You—" rasped Sirius, and shook his head wordlessly. Eloise had been taking swift notes throughout, but she heard the hitch in Sirius' voice, and rested her quill at her side.

"—are phenomenal. Your dad—"

Harry swallowed hard, as did Sirius.

"You have—no idea—when you were little we used to—float you around and joke that one day you'd—and you *did*."

Eloise couldn't move. Her eyes were cloudy again, and so were Harry's; he blinked several times and stared up at the ceiling; everyone, including Eloise, looked away. She had barely felt the soft pressure at her side before she realized Colin had closed his hand around hers.

Something whirled in the otherwise silent room, and Eloise looked up to see Ron holding out his left arm, a gold and silver ball beating its wings between his thumb and forefinger.

"I nicked it," he said, his voice hoarse. "So you could keep it."

"You keep it," Harry breathed.

"Okay," said Ron.

Ginny's hand gripped Ron's arm with what was very clearly considerable force.

Harry seemed incapable of speech; his eyes were bright and wet, and still full of wonder as he surveyed the crowd around his bed. Objectivity aside, Eloise couldn't help but feel a surge of gratitude to the people who were making Harry Potter's life complete at last.

"Harry?" she choked out. "I won't interrupt if...if you need more time, but...if I had a few questions, would you...would you answer them?"

The look Harry gave her was almost relieved. He nodded. "Go ahead."

Tingles raced up Eloise's spine as Colin raised his camera.

"Great match, Harry," he whispered, then blinded them all with a flash.

"Thanks Colin," said Harry, using his uninjured arm to rub his eyes.

A harried mediwizard bustled past carrying bandages, and Eloise suddenly remembered her most important question. "One moment, Harry," she said, hurrying over to the surly man. "Excuse me? Excuse me—your name is Sam, right?"

Sam the mediwizard put his hands on his hips and stared at her impatiently. "That's me. And?"

"I just wanted to make sure—Harry and Ms. Knight are on painkillers, right?"

"Of course they are, with those injuries."

"Erm, right, so, are they okay to talk? I mean, I have some questions for them, but if their answers are going to be altered because of the pain-easing potions, it wouldn't be right to—" Eloise stopped. Sam was looking at her as if she had suddenly sprouted tentacles and burst into song. "I'm sorry, did I say something wrong, or insult you, or—"

"You want to know if talking to them would be *ethical*?" said Sam with strong disbelief in his voice.

"I've insulted you, I'm sorry, I didn't meant to imply—"

"No, no," Sam laughed, and his expression softened with respect. "You'll have to forgive me, Miss, but that's the first time I've been asked that question. What was your name?"

"Eloise Midgen, sir, from the *Daily Prophet*." "Well, I'm glad to see the *Prophet* stopped hiring those blasted Skeeters and Flummerys. Midgen. Have to remember that. To answer your question, no, I've only given them Allevium Draughts, which will not affect their speech or thought. They're strictly for pain. Ask 'em anything you want."

"Let's not get carried away, Sam," said Oliver.

"I look forward to reading your article, Miss Midgen," Sam said, holding out his hand for Eloise to shake.

"Thanks," muttered Eloise, shaking his hand. Colin was staring at her, point-blank, wearing an expression she'd never seen before. "Right, so, Harry," she said, nearly overheating with embarrassment. "That was a terrific match."

Eloise poised her quill on a fresh role of parchment and set the instrument to record, leaving her hands free. "Just transcribing, not Quick Quotes, I promise," she said, making Ginny laugh.

"I know, Eloise."

"Anyway, Harry, my biggest question is, how did that feel? To be out on the pitch again?"

Harry sighed heavily, and Eloise wondered if she had started too big.

"It was...wonderful," he finally managed. "I don't know, I mean I can't really describe for you...I haven't played a real game in a long time. And never at night, except for that one long one in sixth year. But even then...I'm sorry, this isn't really answering your question, is it?"

"It's fine, Harry, really. It's perfect. Just talk."

Harry looked abashed for a moment. "Okay. Well. It was sort of like, like being back at school."

"Yeah, with Oliver barking at you and everything!" shouted Fred.

Harry laughed. "Especially with Oliver there. He's very, er..."

"Watch it," Oliver warned. His hand was still on Knight's head, and he and the rest of the Cannons were watching the interview from their side of the room, making Eloise feel as if that Snitch Ron pinched had made its way into her stomach.

"He's very enthusiastic," Harry finished. "Definitely enthusiastic."

"That's one word for it," joked Fred.

"Stark raving madman is another," put in George.

"Do you feel Oliver's style has changed since school, Harry?" asked Eloise.

Harry laughed so hard he winced. "No. Not at all. He's...well, he's Oliver."

"Oliver, can you comment on that?"

"Yes I bloody well can. I treat my men—right, right, men and women," he added when Firoza

coughed, “-like the professional ruddy athletes they are which is *why we’re undefeated*.”

“Yet, you didn’t hug Harry when he caught the Snitch, although you’ve ambushed Ms. Knight after every game thus far. Can you tell me why that is?” asked Eloise, knowing perfectly well what the answer was.

Oliver dropped his hand from Knight’s pillow and backed away, his mouth opening and closing on its own. Colin’s camera flashed, and Oliver suddenly looked like a trapped animal. “That’s—that’s-” he stammered, “that’s-”

“Oh, ho...ow...” said Harry, wincing from laughter again. “Oliver? That’s fine. I don’t feel bad that you didn’t try to hug me. Honestly. It’s okay to break that, er, tradition.”

Maureen Knight looked as if she wanted to disappear into her pillow.

“Midgen, you can’t say—you can’t print-” stuttered Oliver.

“Don’t worry, not tonight,” said Eloise, letting a mischievous smile creep onto her face. “Not this time—but we’ll talk soon?”

Oliver nodded fervently; Eloise got the idea he just wanted out of the conversation, and that was fine. She had to finish her Harry exclusive before moving on to her Wood exclusive, anyway.

“So, Harry,” said Eloise, turning back. “You haven’t played a game since school, but you have scrimmaged with the Cannons. Was this game what you expected playing professional Quidditch to be like?”

“I never really...” he answered slowly, and as he struggled for more words, he began to look tense.. “I never really expected it. I mean, I don’t think I ever thought...I don’t think I ever thought I’d play professional Quidditch. Even when I was trying out for the Cannons—I never really...” He looked over at Ginny.

“You never looked that far ahead,” Ginny offered.

“Yeah.” Harry relaxed. His eyes lingered on Ginny, and a half-smile touched his mouth. “That’s it.”

Eloise’s quill was scratching away at top speed. “And you just happened to be at the game tonight?”

“Yeah—Ron has season tickets.”

“Which she got for me,” said Ron, pointing at Knight. Oliver looked down in surprise.

“That’s right, Oliver,” she said, grinning. “I’m responsible for getting Harry to the game. I did go to the School for the Sight, you know.” She tapped her head with her hand. “Knew this was going to happen. All part of my plan.”

Oliver rolled his eyes, and Eloise giggled.

“Did anyone else know you were second reserve, Harry?”

“No. I didn’t think I’d ever have to play.”

“And Oliver—how did you decide to put Harry in over your first reserve, who after all has been practicing with you all season?”

“DECIDE? There was no decide. He’s Harry Potter. He’s...the only one with the talent to fill Knight’s place.” Knight looked up at Oliver in shock. “What? I mean it.”

The Cannons snickered wickedly in the background.

“That’s right, you lot, go ahead, we’ll see who’ll be running the drills tomorrow,” Oliver warned. The room went quiet.

Eloise turned back to Harry. “Can you tell me about the last few minutes before the game?”

“Sure.” Harry shifted a little on his bed; Ginny quickly ran over and raised the top half so that Harry could sit partly upright, then gave Harry’s good shoulder the briefest of touches before going back to her place next to Ron. Harry stirred at her touch and watched her as she walked away, a grateful look on his face.

“I only had a minute or two,” he finally said. “They gave me a uniform and Oliver gave me a quick rundown of the competition. He warned me about the Kestrels’ leprechaun gold tricks, but I don’t think I really listened, obviously. Then he gave me one of his usual pep talks, and we went to the field.”

“Any last minute advice?”

“A little,” said Harry, looking sheepish.

“Oh, don’t tell me,” laughed George. “He told him to ‘get it or die trying,’ didn’t you, Oliver? Oh, Eloise, I don’t know if you knew—back in fourth year, Oliver here thought it’d be inspiring to tell Harry to get the Snitch or die trying—and Harry here is always so obliging-”

“Was that the match with the rogue Bludger?”

“Right in one,” said George. “We told him what a stupid thing it was to say, but that’s Oliver.

'Get it or die trying,' honestly. And then Harry here goes and almost dies-

"But he got the Snitch!" laughed Angelina. "Harry always got the Snitch."

"Yeah, despite the raving lunatic advice of raving lunatic captains," said George.

"So what was the advice this time, Harry?" asked Eloise.

"It was, erm..." Harry glanced briefly at Oliver. "It was, 'Get it or die trying.' "

Eloise had to fight down a laugh as she watched everyone in the room turn to look blankly at Oliver.

"What?"

"You're *joking*," said Fred. "Oliver. Don't you *learn*, man?"

"What I learned is that that particular bit of advice has *worked*, twice now, and Harry did not die."

"Third time's a charm," muttered Ron. "Do us all a favor and don't play next time he says that, okay, Harry?"

"Okay," Harry laughed.

Harry was looking more relaxed than Eloise had ever seen him; perhaps it was time to start asking the real questions. If Ginny would let her. She took a deep breath.

"Harry, you..." she started, choosing her words carefully, "you've done a lot for the wizarding world." Ginny didn't seem angry. Harry inspected his bedcovers. Eloise plunged ahead. "People just expect great things from you at this point. Do you ever feel that pressure?"

Harry's eyes darkened, but only a little. He seemed to draw a breath into himself. "People expect...I don't know what people expect."

"What do you think they expect?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry. I just...I think they're just happy things are the way they are."

"Aren't you?" said Eloise gently.

"Yeah, of course I am," said Harry and his face clouded over. He didn't say anything else for a few seconds, and Eloise felt sure he was about to clam up for the rest of the interview. But he drew another ragged breath, and looked up again. "But I didn't do, you know...everything everyone says I did."

For a second, Eloise couldn't think of a thing to say. No one else seemed to be offering helpful hints, either; everyone was either looking at her or at Harry, wearing various levels of intrigue. Colin's camera was silent. They all knew what Harry had done. Harry seemed to be the only one who did not. "What do you think you did, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "I think-I had a lot of help. I think-I have a lot of friends." He looked down at his hands.

"Family," Sirius corrected hoarsely.

Angelina gave a suspicious snuffle and settled into Fred's embrace. Ginny leaned against Ron's chest, a content look on her face; Ron slung a lanky arm around her shoulders and rested his chin on the top of her head.

Eloise thought she would burst into tears, but she bit it back. It was getting late. And Harry was loosening up. She had to keep going.

"H-Harry, that brings me to my next question. Your friends have certainly become your family. What do you think brought you to them?"

Harry leaned back on his pillows. "Your questions were easier this summer," he said weakly.

"Ah, but you didn't get to see the whole list."

"Right, Ginny, go scratch off all Eloise's questions," said Ron, but Ginny didn't laugh with the rest.

"I wouldn't," she said quietly.

"Harry, you know you can choose not to answer if you want, right?" asked Eloise. "Anything you say that you don't want me to use, I won't."

"Really?" Harry looked as if he'd never heard of a stranger thing than journalistic ethics. It would have made Eloise laugh if it weren't so sad.

"Really, Harry."

"But it's okay-I won't...after what you did for Ron...if you need me to answer questions, I will. Can you repeat the last one again?"

"Sure," said Eloise, in awe that one tiny, factual follow-up story had meant so much to the Weasleys. "What do you think brought you to the Weasleys?"

"Easy," said Harry, sitting up, suddenly very bright, "the hair. You really can't miss it, can you?"

"But honestly," said Harry soberly, when the giggles and jeers had died down. "I think it was

just luck.”

From across the room, Ginny gave Eloise an encouraging smile. Eloise smiled back, and as she asked her next question, and Harry answered even more candidly than he had before, everything else faded away; she settled in to have a nice long conversation, not even hearing the scratch of her quill as it set down material for what was quickly becoming the story of her life.

* * * * *

“DONE!”

Eloise slammed her parchment on Leon’s desk.

“DONE, DONE, DONE!”

“Two minutes to spare,” said Leon, laughing. “Sure you don’t want to-”

“NO! It’s DONE!”

“All right, all right.”

“And Leon? I need a day off.”

Leon raked his eyes over the parchment and let out a low whistle. “Midgen. You can have anything you want. Harry Potter really said all of this?”

“Every word. I had my wand record it, you can hear it if you like.”

Leon waved impatiently. “Not to check—I just want to *listen* to it. Jesus, Midgen. Harry Potter, talking like this. What did you do, drug him?”

Eloise giggled. “No.”

“But look,” he said, tapping the parchment, “Ron Weasley, Ginny Weasley, Oliver Wood, George Weasley, Maureen Knight, Sirius bloody BLACK. Midgen, were you a spy in the war?”

Eloise shook her head, grinning so hard her cheeks hurt. “No. Not a spy, I promise.”

“Well, anyway—here.” Leon thrust the parchment into none other than John Prattleby’s hands. Prattleby had been hovering annoyingly about, but for the first time, Eloise wasn’t worried; she stood up straight and offered Prattleby as sweet a smile as she could muster.

“Thanks, John,” she said. “Let me know if there’s anything you need clarified.” And she turned on her heel and walked briskly back to her desk, where Colin was waiting, legs and arms crossed as he leaned against the lip.

“You’re done then?” he said.

“Just about. I should hang around, though—wait for Prattleby to do a nice hatchet job on my article. That’s always great fun.”

Colin snorted. “I’d like to see him try, on this story.”

A warm feeling of contentment had spread so far through Eloise that she didn’t even correct Colin’s praise. Prattleby *wasn’t* going to do much to the story. It was good. Very good. Her best yet, the best she’d get for quite a while. She couldn’t believe it was written and done with; the interview ended a close to ten ‘o’ clock, leaving her exactly an hour to work. She and Colin had raced back to the newsroom as if their clothes were on fire, Eloise scribbling the entire time. Colin had run off to the darkroom so fast she didn’t even see him go, and she had thrown her cloak to the side, spread her transcript and notes out on her desk, and had written like a woman possessed. No one had dared come near her while she was writing, not even Leon.

Now Eloise sat at her desk and rested her head on it, watching the newsroom traffic with tired eyes. The last minutes of production were under way, and as long as the day had been and as badly as Eloise needed sleep, she knew she wasn’t going anywhere. She wanted a copy of her exclusive, and she wanted it before she left the office. There was an empty picture frame sitting in her flat, waiting for a story like this; it would be full before she went to bed. Maybe she’d act like a total loser and ask Harry to sign it.

“Hey, did you see Sweeney’s piece on Knight?” asked Colin, softly nudging the top of her head.

Eloise sat up. “No, is it good?”

“It’s great—here.” Colin handed her a piece of parchment that looked like it had been through four editors’ hands, and together they read through the article; they were just up to the part about Knight “mysteriously” leaving the Ballycastle Bats (“Guess their Keeper wasn’t *handsome* enough,” joked Colin) when someone cleared his throat.

John Prattleby stood before them. Eloise braced herself. “That was an excellent piece, Midgen,” he said. “Front page has it now. Good work.” He gave a little half nod, and one to Colin, and sauntered off.

Eloise turned slowly to look at Colin. “What just happened?”

Colin laughed. “Nothing that wasn’t deserved.”

"Oh, stop, you haven't even read the article yet," said Eloise, blushing.

"I know," said Colin without changing expression. "So, when the issue is done, how about we—"

"MIDGEN!" Jim Scrynne screamed from across the newsroom. "GOLD! This is GOLD!" Scrynne sprinted over, a few newspapers clutched in his fist. "Here you go, first issues."

Eloise took the paper with a trembling hand. McCall's game piece, under a small "POTTER PLAYS" ran in one column down the lefthand side of the page; the rest was taken up by a five-column headline, with an "EXCLUSIVE" tag waving off the end. The featured picture showed Harry, smiling as he lay battered and bruised in the hospital wing, encircled by his family; next to it, in print just big enough to make Eloise's heart lurch, were the words "By Eloise Midgen, Daily Prophet Correspondent."

"Wow," she breathed.

"Nice, huh?" said Scrynne, grinning widely. "Good work, both of you." Eloise barely looked up to thank him as he walked away.

Eloise leaned back in her chair and looked up at Colin, who was grinning even more widely than Scrynne had been.

"Wait, don't read it," said Colin, settling himself on Eloise's desk with his copy of the paper in his hands. "Let me."

"*POTTER FINALLY FLYING HIGH*," he read. "*The Boy Who Lived Speaks About Professional Quidditch, Family and Life After Voldemort*. That's really snappy."

Eloise giggled. "I didn't write that part."

"Moving on. *By Eloise Midgen, Daily Prophet Correspondent*.

Harry Potter is happy.

He's just fallen 40 feet from a broomstick, his right side is battered as if beaten by a giant, and tomorrow he'll return to work over the icy waters of Azkaban Island, on a Ministry of Magic task force assigned to keep Dementors from escaping the prison. Yet, as he sits in the Chudley Cannons' hospital wing, propped up on pillows and physically numbed by a litany of painkilling charms, Harry Potter is surprisingly content.

Of course, it helps that that Potter has just made his professional Quidditch debut, having been literally pulled from the stands to step in for the Cannons' injured Seeker. It helps that he has just played his first real game since Hogwarts, where he was Gryffindor's star performer. It helps that he has just pulled off a miraculous victory, his stunning capture of the Snitch allowing the Cannons to overcome rotten trickery from the opposition to retain their miraculously unblemished season record.

But the thing that's really making Harry Potter smile is grouped protectively around his bedside, displaying worried expressions, freckles, ginger hair, and eyes red from too much joy.

It's his family.

Sirius Black, Remus Lupin and a horde of Weasleys surround him, fuss over him, treat him as though he was born into their ranks. Potter has never known this kind of attention. And to look at him, glowing over their simple presence, is to know how much he's needed it.

'I never thought about having a family,' says Potter. 'It just seems the kind of thing you only get one of.' And Voldemort killed his. So when Potter says it was 'just luck' that brought him to the people he now calls family, perhaps he's right.

'Rubbish,' says Ron Weasley, who Potter has known since his first train ride on the Hogwarts Express. 'Luck is nothing to do with it. Our Mum saw him at Kings' Cross and wouldn't let us alone until we took him in. He's a bit of a nuisance, really, always getting us into trouble,' Weasley jokes.

There's partial truth to that statement; until recently, Potter's life was constantly under threat. 'It's strange, with Voldemort gone,' says Potter. 'I don't know if I ever really believed he would be.' He is, and Potter killed him, thanks to an immensely complex spell empowered by his newfound family's love for their newfound brother.

Six months after that legendary battle, Potter's family is still protecting him, even when there isn't much they can do. Just tonight, as Potter fell from a horrifying height from his teammate's Firebolt 5, this clan, who had been watching the game with white knuckles, jumped barriers, barreled through security and threatened to hex anyone that stood between them and the injured Potter. The Quidditch, the game, the save, the victory—yes, all of that helps. But having his family around him when he woke up in the hospital wing?

'It was perfect,' says Potter. 'I couldn't ask for—well, maybe one thing. I wish Hermione were here.' He's referring to Hermione Granger, his other best friend (and Ron Weasley's

girlfriend), who has been in Cortona since September, studying the subtle craft of Thinking. 'She would have enjoyed this—though she might have had a heart attack first.'

'Not to worry, mate,' says Ron Weasley, patting a pair of Omnioculars. 'I have it all saved, she can have her kittens soon enough.'

*

After spending almost all of the first 18 years of his life unwittingly embroiled in a war he did nothing—short of being born to Godric Gryffindor's bloodline—to start, one might expect Potter to pack his post-bellum schedule with nothing but lazy afternoons, nights at the pub and perhaps a Quidditch scrimmage here and there.

If you think so, you don't know Potter.

Barely two weeks after the war ended, Potter was, quite literally, on the field again—trying out for a Quidditch team for the first time, for his old school captain and the Chudley Cannons' current sergeant, Oliver Wood.

'I thought I'd just see what happened,' Potter shrugs. 'I don't know what I was expecting, trying out.'

Certainly not an easy ride; Wood doesn't get his reputation as a slavedriver's taskmaster for nothing. Potter spent his first-ever summer away from Muggle society at the Quidditch pitch, training from as early as 6 a.m. until as late as 4 p.m., with no guarantee he'd make the final cut. Not even when his old schoolmate was captain.

'Oliver didn't even notice me at first,' says Potter. 'I showed up and he just yelled at me to get in the air.'

'Oh, I knew he was there,' says Wood. 'You can't miss Harry Potter on a broom. But the little buggler made it onto my team without trying out once, and I'll be damned if it was going to happen again! Besides—he had some fair competition.'

Maureen Knight. Ex Ballycastle Bat. Such a threat to the opposition that she was injured before tonight's game even started. Willing to make a Seeker-shaped hole in the ground if it means getting the Snitch.

'We fought for it good,' laughs Knight. 'I went home aching every night, Potter drove me so mad.'

In the end, Wood granted the first-string Seeker position to Potter.

'It's not that Knight didn't have it,' says Wood. 'She had it in spades. But Potter and Quidditch—that's art. With him as first and Knight as second, I knew the Cannons would conquer. Then Potter got that bloody owl from the Ministry.'

Wood growls a little as he talks about the Ministry, and anyone who is thankful to Potter for his conquests would growl too; the wizarding world at large probably wants nothing more than to see Potter play Quidditch for a living, enjoy the rest of his youth, and never, ever, have to wrestle with a Dark force again. Perhaps that last bit is wishful thinking, but it's not out of line to think Potter should steer clear of heroism for a few years at least.

Or even a few months.

On the very same day—indeed, directly after—Wood made his Quidditch position announcements, Potter received an urgent owl from the Ministry, asking for help. The Permanent Azkaban Patrol (P.A.P.) was having difficulty rounding up the nine dragon-riders they needed to effectively surround the tiny prison-island with the natural, positive energy dragons emit, which staves off Dementors. The Dementors, restless now that the free reign they enjoyed while Voldemort was in power has been stripped, constantly threaten to escape Azkaban and infiltrate civilization; as there is no known enchantment to destroy a Dementor, Acting Minister of Magic Arthur Weasley devised a plan to entrap them, in the short term. A round-the-clock patrol of dragons keeps the Dementors at bay. They're cunning in their evil, though, and have been known to try and use the smallest gap in coverage as a wedge, or join forces to attack one rider.

'We all told him not to take it,' says Ron Weasley. 'But Harry couldn't say no. He just couldn't.'

'I went to Azkaban because it felt important,' says Potter. 'I love Quidditch, but helping Mr. Weasley and the rest of the Ministry felt like it was what I should do.'

And so Potter went, leaving behind his childhood joy to pursue adult duty. Again.

'Harry could never have lived with himself if he had chosen what he wanted over what needed to be done,' says Remus Lupin, once Potter's Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, who was one of Potter's deceased parents' closest friends. 'He's just like his father that way.'

The job, however, is getting harder each day. Recent events suggest that the dragons' power is weakening; there are only nine riders, and the shifts are long. The dragons are growing irritable and sickly, and are prone to tossing their riders into the sea. If a beast the size of a hundred men can feel a Dementor's presence, it stands to reason that the riders could also be exposed.

But don't expect Potter to tell you that he's affected by the Dementors' presence. Don't expect him to mope or want pity for having to stave off Voldemort four times before he was of wizarding age. Don't even expect him to be worried at the idea of another Dark force rising within his lifetime.

'Someone gave me good advice about that, once,' he says, looking pensive. 'If it happens, we'll fight. We'll try and stop it. There's no use worrying about it now. What's coming will come. We'll meet it when it does.'

Somewhere, the owner of that quote—the late Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts—is smiling.

*

Quidditch Lesson No. 1, by Oliver Wood: Get it or die trying.

When Maureen Knight was knocked out in tonight's pre-game by an arguably intentional hit by Kestrel Tim Boomer (now suspended for cheating during the game), the future of the Cannons' undefeated record seemed bleak. So when Potter showed up on the field—after being literally thrown out of the stands by Ron Weasley, a lifetime Chudley Cannon fanatic and one of the many people who had no idea Potter was second-reserve for the team—Wood said he felt as if his dreams had come true. Potter was just as stunned.

'He made me sign that paper saying I'd be second reserve, and I only did it because I felt so bad about leaving the team before I'd really been on it,' says Potter. 'I never, in a million years, thought tonight would happen.'

'It's that bloody nobility complex of his that made him sign it,' jokes Ron Weasley. 'At least it's finally came in useful.'

Wood immediately substituted Potter for Knight, giving him a very short explanation of the Kestrels' key maneuvers, a quick demonstration of a Firebolt 5 and a very old, very useful piece of advice. 'Get it or die trying.'

He's used that advice once before, during a very memorable match in Potter's second year. Both times he's said it, Potter did nearly die—at Hogwarts, because of a tampered Bludger that nearly took his head off; tonight, because of an opposing Seeker who nearly took his arm off. But Potter also caught the Snitch both times, and Wood makes no apologies for his overzealous advice tactics, even when George Weasley calls him a 'raving lunatic.'

'It was wonderful,' says Potter of his return to the pitch. 'I'd forgot, really, what it was like to play a real game.'

'He belongs up there,' proclaims Ginny Weasley. Potter and Ginny are rumoured to be dating, but ask either of them about it and they'll turn identical shades of scarlet and change the subject back to Quidditch. 'He was always most at home in the air.'

He could stay there, too; it's only another half-year until the next tryouts. Potter makes no promises.

'I don't know what's going to happen. Perhaps if the problems are solved at Azkaban, perhaps then. I'd like to play Quidditch,' he says, in a way that makes you think work will be just a little harder, from now on.

He'll go, though. He'll go right back to work, because that's Harry Potter. Even as he sits, transformed, in the Cannons' hospital wing, safe and content for the first time in his young but long life, he's still Harry Potter, his parents' child.

'You have no idea,' says an emotional Sirius Black, talking to Potter, his godson. 'When you were little we used to float you around and joke that one day you'd—and you did.'

Yes he did.

"Eloise. Wow." Colin was still staring at the paper. Eloise could only see the crown of his sandy head shaking from side to side. "You wrote that in an hour?"

Eloise laughed, much louder than she'd intended to. It was such a relief, sitting here with the article printed. It was as if she hadn't worked all evening, though her vaguely aching bones said otherwise. "Yes," she said faintly, seeing visions of her bed dance before her eyes.

"Hey." Colin tapped her over the head with the paper. "Are you with me?"

"Oh—yes. Yes. I'm here. I'm so tired." She needed to just fall down and...rest a while. Quickly, so she couldn't talk herself out of it, Eloise folded her arms over Colin's nearest knee, and rested

her head upon them. She closed her eyes; he was so warm and calm. He'd never been that way at school. But then, she thought ruefully, a lot of things had changed since school.

Colin stroked the top of her head gently, pulling hair away from her cheek. Eloise wondered if anyone noticed them, sitting here in the newsroom this way; Prattleby would have new reasons to scowl at her by morning. But suddenly it didn't matter so much.

"Have you eaten?" said Colin, out of nowhere.

Eloise made a face. "Oh...food...I forgot. Oh, but I can't...I need sleep..."

"I know. So how about we meet after we both get a good night's rest?" His voice sounded strange. Strained. "Maybe tomorrow night at eight? At *Moon Lights*?"

Eloise sat up straight. *Moon Lights*. Dinner...dancing...ambience...yes... She looked at Colin's face; he wasn't joking. If anything, he looked rather nervous. "Yes," she said, unable to stop herself from grinning. "I'd love to."

"Good." He was grinning, too; for nearly a minute, they did nothing but grin at each other.

"Hey. Yoo-hoo. Hello. *HELLO*?" It was Leon.

"Yes?" said Eloise, not turning.

"Just checking to see what you were up to," said Leon, and Eloise could hear the snicker in his voice. "Couldn't interest you two in an assignment, tomorrow night, there's a-"

"NO." They had both said it, instantly.

"Sorry, Leon," Eloise giggled. "Is it important?"

"Not really," and his left eye twitched with mischief. "Sweeney can do it. I was just testing. Go the hell home, Midgen. Get out of my newsroom."

"No problems here! See you Tuesday, Leon." She grabbed her cloak and swung it around her shoulders.

"My flat's on the way," said Colin. "I'll walk you." Colin offered his arm, and Eloise took it, feeling rather grand despite the massive amount of ink that had, over the course of the night, landed on her hands and robes.

It was cold at midnight, and Colin tugged Eloise closer as they stepped outside. As they walked up the cobbled, lamplit lane together, pointing out nonexistent constellations and laughing at their own silliness, Eloise thought of Harry, and, not counting everything else he'd done, how much she now owed him.

How very, very much.

Whoa. A guest chapter. How did that happen? Thank you thank you thank you thank you, , from the bottom of my heart, Arabella, Zsenya and every AtE list member, for not murdering me for taking this long with it. A&Z did not know they would hit what was probably the busiest month and a half of my LIFE when I started writing this, and when they said they'd wait for it. And they didn't go back on their word, though if it were me and my chapter was sitting there, finished, I'd've given up and posted it. I'm sure they've learned their lesson, but I still say thanks, because now I feel all special. Oh. I'm smiling like a goof, writing this A/N, after A&Z's surprise.

Thanks also to Arabella and CoKerry for the betas, CoKerry for talking me through a lot of this, and SlowFox, who GOT the chapter for Britpicking and GOT it back to me in record time, which means I GOT this chapter uploaded before I left work, and GOT to get this thing finished before I died of stress and the rest of you murdered me for withholding.

And thanks also to Oliver, who cannot ever growl enough.

Another A/N: Some of the dialogue in the hospital wing-before Eloise starts her interview, including that crazy-crazy-crazy touching quote from Sirius-goes right to the lovely Arabella's credit, as does Ron's Snitch pinch.

Tell Him About It

Mick really did have a strong jaw, reflected Rose, sneaking a glance at him as he stopped to look in the window of Magical Menagerie. Today was technically his “day off”—he’d finished his dragon-riding shift at four yesterday afternoon, and didn’t have to return until eight tonight. She hoped he’d had enough sleep and guiltily remembered that it had been close to three in the morning before they’d finally drifted off, exhausted.

They’d risen late, and after a hearty breakfast—Mick’s method was to throw whatever he could find in a cauldron over the fire, and it almost always ended up tasting decent—they’d taken a leisurely stroll to Diagon Alley in order to do some shopping. Rose needed to buy a new clock; they’d broken her old one and no amount of magic had been able to make it run properly.

“Do you want to go in?” she asked. She didn’t really like it in Magical Menagerie—it smelled odd and the animals were very loud, besides, Mick could spend *hours* it seemed, looking at the different pets—but she found that she had asked without even thinking twice about it.

He looked at her incredulously. “Really? You don’t mind? I just want to check something out with the lizards.”

“No, it’s fine,” she said, and looking down the street, saw a familiar, twinkling sign. “Tell you what, I’ll head down to Bellibon and you just come down when you’re ready.”

Raising her hand to his lips, Mick kissed it gallantly, and even this exaggerated motion made Rose’s stomach flutter. But she retained her composure and pushed him away, pretending to be annoyed, yet secretly enjoying the feel of his chest under her hand. “Oh, go on,” she said, though she was smiling. “See you in a bit.” And she turned and headed down the street.

Bellibon was her sister Lavender’s favorite shop. Rose had been inside a few times, the most recent last August when she’d purchased hair ribbons for herself, Lavender and Parvati to wear during the wedding. It was just as large, busy and noisy as Magical Menagerie, but it smelled like flowers instead of rat pellets, and Rose preferred flying butterfly clips to flying ravens.

On instinct, Rose walked to the very back of the shop, trying to avoid the saleswitches as she weaved her way around pretty table displays and bins filled with small bottles of perfumes and love potions. She still hadn’t bought Mick a Christmas gift—it was two weeks away and she hadn’t mentioned it at all. She wondered if Mick was waiting for an invitation to the Brown family Christmas dinner. She hadn’t told anyone that she was seeing him—she knew that Bill and Charlie Weasley were somewhat aware of what was going on, and judging by the way the latter had glared at her while visiting the Ministry the week before, they weren’t too happy with Mick’s choice of girlfriend. She couldn’t believe that she’d ever thought of them as a pair, when Mick was obviously so much more mature than his friend.

Mick had certainly been a surprise, thought Rose, stopping to sift through rows of amethyst amulets and ornate pewter charm necklaces lining the back wall of the shop. After their first few dates, he’d slowly moved in with her, starting by Apparating directly to her flat after work and napping until she returned home. She hadn’t expected to feel so comfortable around him or to realize that she’d grown used to being able to talk to him. It was impossible to imagine life without him, and Rose shuddered as she tried to remember how she’d spent her evenings before September. She turned her mind to more pleasant things— to Mick as he looked after he’d just stepped out of the shower, with his hair much darker and standing on end, and to his ability to make her see

By Zsenya. An *After the End* Outtake Featuring Rose and Mick. Author’s Note: Much thanks goes to Arabella, for turning Mick and Rose into real characters and letting me develop them further, and to B Bennett for providing the original inspiration for Rose K. Brown. Cap’n Kathy is an excellent, canon-thumping beta-reader.

I’ve borrowed heavily from a lot of things in this story. I stole a line from the movie *Some Kind of Wonderful*—all you 80s junkies, can you spot it? I also stole a line from the Winona Ryder film version of *Little Women*. It’s a running joke in my family, and makes a great wedding toast. Lavender has become very like Charlotte Lucas, but I assure you that Seamus is in no way at all like Mr. Collins.

This story takes place in the late autumn of *After the End*. It would probably make sense to read this only if you’ve read *After the End*, as it’s based on two original characters from that story. I’m not necessarily recommending that you go and read *After the End* if you haven’t before. It’s really, really long. And this outtake just makes it longer...

humor in even the most seemingly grim situations.

A giggle interrupted her daydreaming, and Rose stiffened when she heard a familiar voice say, "What about this one, Mum?" Afraid to turn around, Rose sidled herself into the farthest corner of the room, and found herself absently sifting through a bin filled with crudely-titled erotic potions, designed to "take that wizard by surprise".

"Lavender! We're here to find something pretty for your sister, she has plenty of books—what about these earrings?"

"She doesn't really wear earrings, Mum," said Lavender, "and besides, she *likes* to read."

Rose flipped up the hood on her cloak, before realizing that the wine-colored garment had been a gift from her mother the previous Christmas. She flipped it down again, and out of the corner of her eye, tried to figure out a way to escape the shop without being seen. Her mother and sister were standing on one side of a free-standing bookshelf towards the back of the shop, and Rose slowly moved around the perimeter of the room, until she was standing on the other side of it. Now she was safely out of their sight, but paled when she saw that her side of the bookshelf was filled with self-help pamphlets and slim volumes filled with selected Love Charms.

"I really wish I could see your sister settled down," Mrs. Brown was saying to her youngest daughter. "She's so pretty and smart, but she doesn't seem to want to attract the boys."

Certain that her sister was going to agree with their mother as usual, Rose was surprised to hear Lavender answer, "She'll be fine, Mum. Rose just has her own way of doing things. I was only joking about the book—she doesn't need some silly manual or a love potion to entrance some man. She just hasn't met anyone smart enough for her yet, and I'm glad. She deserves the best."

The small smile that was beginning to form around Rose's mouth disappeared immediately when she heard a loud, male, voice say, "No thanks, I'm just looking for someone."

"Well, we have books to help with that, although a wizard like you probably doesn't really need them," said the sales witch, giggling. Rose ducked under some sort of filmy material that was floating above her and headed for the front of the shop, hoping she could usher Mick away without being discovered by her mother and sister. He saw her coming, and his face broke into a wide grin that made Rose's knees feel weak. "I think I've found the one I want," he boomed, turning to address the sales witch. "How much for this blonde one?" He reached out for Rose, as she'd stopped a few feet away from him, frozen with embarrassment.

Retreating as far as she could behind the hood of her cloak, Rose shot a withering glance at Mick, and tried to free her arm. People were staring now, and Rose only hoped that her mother and sister were not among them. She didn't dare look.

"Feisty too!" Mick continued, taking Rose's elbow jabbing into his ribs as a sign of affection. "Put it on my tab," he joked to the sales witch before allowing himself to be led outside, but not before throwing an arm around Rose's shoulders.

Once on the street, Rose disentangled herself from Mick and, holding her chin high, began to walk briskly away from him. His laughter faded, and she heard him utter a confused "What?"

She didn't answer. Inside, Rose knew that she shouldn't be upset with him—after all, he hadn't known who was in the shop—but she had nowhere else to direct her frustration.

"Rose! What?" Mick had caught up with her and grabbed the back of her cloak. She turned to face him, narrowing her eyes.

"That was very immature!" she hissed.

Mick looked relieved. He stepped up to her and put a hand on each of her shoulders. "You should be used to it by now," he said gently. "What's really wrong?"

Sighing, Rose looked away. They were still in view of Bellibon's elaborate entrance way. More than anything, she wanted to be gone from Diagon Alley.

"Rosie?"

Mustering a smile, she pulled his hands from her shoulders and intertwined their fingers. "I'm fine. Just tired. We didn't sleep much last night—I'd like to go home and take a nap."

"You sure? We didn't even look for the clock yet."

"I'm sure," she answered, and still holding hands, they Disapparated for home.

* * * * *

"Rose? You there?" Rose jumped at the sound of her sister's voice, and immediately glanced over at Mick, who was still sound asleep. He'd been more tired than usual when he came home from work lately, and Rose preferred to let him nap. She gently lifted Mick's feet off of her lap and slid off of the couch, which was thankfully out of view of the fireplace.

"Hello Lavender," she said in a soft voice. Her sister's head, magnified several times by the fire,

craned as far as it could to try to see around her sister. "Why are you whispering?" Lavender asked very loudly. "Is someone there?"

Rose heard a creak as Mick shifted on the sofa. She smiled and in what she hoped would be a joking tone of voice said, "Yes, my new house-elf-comes in once a week to dust the cat hair."

"Oh," said Lavender, looking doubtful. "Anyway, I wanted to talk to you about Christmas. Would you mind if Seamus and I hosted it at our flat?"

"Not at all," Rose answered. "Why would I -" She was interrupted by a high-pitched squeal from across the room.

"Miss Rosie! Miss Rosie! These underclothes is very delicate! You is wanting me to wash them with special cleanser?"

Rose felt her neck burn. "You really do have a house-elf?" Lavender asked incredulously.

"I told you I did," Rose said, making a mental note to cast a silencing spell on Mick as soon as she was able. She could hear him snickering. "I pay him well. So, who else will be there? Seamus's parents?"

"Yes," said Lavender, "and Uncle Gerry and Aunt Susan. Seamus also invited his Uncle Pat and Aunt Marian. And their two kids."

"Oh," said Rose, "it'll be nice to have some young children there." A muffled laugh could be heard from across the room.

Lavender giggled as well. "Oh, they're quite grown up. Tara's older than you are, and coming home from Tibet or someplace adventurous for the holidays. And Mick is a year or two younger than you, so I expect you might know him from Hogwarts."

"Mick?" Rose said, feeling her forehead grow warm. She hoped her acting was believable. Frowning her brow in concentration, she said, "Mick Finnigan? I don't remem-"

Seamus's voice called from somewhere beyond Lavender's head, "Not Finnigan, O'Malley. Uncle Pat is me mum's brother."

"Mick O'Malley, Mick O'Malley..." Rose muttered to herself, as if trying to remember, but not succeeding.

"He was at the wedding," prompted Lavender. "Tall, strong-looking, sandy hair like Seamus's, quite attractive."

"You danced with him at Halloween," said Seamus. "Didn't you ask his name?"

"Mmm..." Rose shook her head. Since when was Seamus so interested in her love life? She felt stupid keeping up the act now, but she could see no way out. It didn't help that Mick was sitting behind her, snorting. "Oh!" she said, pretending to have a revelation, "Yes, I was surprised when he told me who he was. I remember him as being shorter than I am and odd-looking. Hung about with Bill Weasley's younger brother. I had to report him once for having a large Bundimun with him in the corridors. You could smell it three floors up." She huffed. "When I asked him *politely* to get rid of it, he whined that it wasn't the Bundimun's fault that it fed on dirt and smelled that way, and that he was only trying to get it outside to set it free."

"We-e-e-ll," said Lavender, looking somewhat sentimental, "it was a nice thought. At least he's kind to animals. What's that? Oh, Seamus says he's a creatures specialist'. I think it's sweet."

From the couch, Mick said, in a high-pitched voice, "It be good to be free, Miss Rosie! Me think that Mr. Mick must be a good man! Fine, and true!"

"Budgie!" hissed Rose, using the first name that drifted into her head. She hoped it was insulting enough. Thus far, she'd avoided looking at Mick, and even now, when she turned, she found that she could only look at his feet. She was terribly annoyed and frustrated, and this was exacerbated by the fact that she wasn't sure whether she would laugh or cry if she looked Mick in the eyes. "It's time to clean the dishes now. Remember, that's part of your contract." She returned her attention to her sister, tossing her hair, and saying, "I agree with Budgie, it would be admirable to set something free, but since I caught Mr. O'Malley and Mr. Weasley on their way to the dungeons and not on their way to the grounds, I naturally assumed that they had another motive."

Seamus laughed very loudly at that, and Lavender turned her head and gave him a look that Rose couldn't see. *Immaturity must run in the family*, thought Rose, as she heard

Lavender blow a kiss and order Seamus out of the room. Rose tried not to roll her eyes when her sister finally turned to address her. She loved Lavender dearly, but could really only handle her in small doses.

"Well, you and Mick can talk about the Bundimun at Christmas dinner," said Lavender, "unless there's anyone you'd like to bring?"

"Me?" said Rose, flinching as her voice went up an octave. "No...no one like that."

"Seamus's cousin is cute," said Lavender, "although, from what it sounds like, he's not exactly

your type. Anyway, I also wanted to see if you wanted to meet for lunch next Friday in Diagon Alley. I was in Bellibon the other day with Mum and she showed me some earrings that she liked. I wanted to get your opinion."

At the mention of Bellibon, Rose's stomach churned unpleasantly. It wasn't as though Lavender needed her input on jewelry selection. Was her sister dropping some sort of veiled hint that Lavender had seen her the other day? Before she could answer, a loud shriek interrupted her thoughts.

"Miss Rosie! Miss Rosie! Budgie cannot be doing the dishes. Budgie is afraid!"

Deciding that she was more annoyed than amused at this point, Rose asked through pursed lips, "What is it, Budgie?"

"The washing-up liquid! Miss Rosie, B-Klean! They is using Bundimun in the soap! Poor, poor creatures..."

Lavender craned her neck to try to get a glimpse of the mysterious house-elf. "You better talk to him," she said slowly. "Will you meet me?"

"Yes, all right," said Rose, relieved that her sister was leaving. "I'll see you Friday."

As soon as Lavender's head disappeared from the fire, Rose swiveled to face Mick, who was laughing so hard that his face was bright red. "They don't use Bundimun," she said, "just the secretions."

This only made him laugh harder. Rose stood there, arms crossed, tapping her foot impatiently.

Mick held up a hand. "I'm stopping," he said, gasping for air. He pushed himself off of the couch and was standing in front of her in two long strides. Roughly pulling her towards him at the hips, he waggled his eyebrows and said, "I guess the Brown women can't resist O'Malley charm. We're like veela to you."

"It's not funny," Rose pouted, not uncrossing her arms, which were now crushed between herself and Mick. "What are we going to do?"

"Do?" asked Mick. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving. Maybe Budgie can make us a spot of supper."

"I meant, what are we going to do about Christmas?" Was he being dense on purpose?

"What do you mean?" asked Mick, looking truly confused. "I think it's brilliant. I've been wanting you to meet my parents, and you'll love my sister. She's been all over the world."

Rose felt a shiver run from her forehead to her toes. "Do they—do your parents know about us?"

Mick shrugged, and released his hold on her. "Well, yeah. My mum's been trying to get in touch with me and I'm always over here, so when I did finally talk to her, she asked me if there was a reason that I wasn't home all the time and I told her that a beautiful flower had stolen my heart."

"You didn't use those exact words, with your mum?"

"I did. I told you —she thinks I'm passionate anyway."

"I haven't mentioned you at all to my parents." She knew, all too well, what the reaction would be. First would come the undeniable shock and surprise. They were always shocked and surprised when she had brought home any boyfriend. It was as though everyone truly believed her to be void of any emotion whatsoever. Second, most of the boys had been in Slytherin, and as much as her parents had somehow dealt with her being Sorted into that house, they had a harder time trusting any of her romantic interests. What followed would be hidden comments that she'd chosen an unsuitable partner, that so-and-so wasn't good enough for her, and that her family really knew best. She hadn't seriously dated anyone since Steven, and it was partly due to the fact that she didn't want to bring anyone home. Rose loved her family dearly, but there were parts of her life that she'd decided needed to stay separate from them. It still hurt her how easily they'd accepted Seamus. He'd always been welcome—always been treated like a son, and Rose couldn't help feeling left out even more now that Lavender and Seamus were married.

Mick was staring at Rose now, an unreadable expression on his face. She looked up at him for a moment, and then looked away, when she couldn't bear it any longer. "What are you afraid of, Rose? I'm in love with you." He paused and took a deep breath. "Do you love me?" he asked. His voice was more controlled-sounding than she had ever heard it, and she squirmed uncomfortably.

When she didn't answer, Mick Disapparated, and Rose realized that more than anything, she was afraid of being without him.

* * * * *

Lavender wanted to meet for lunch in a new café that had recently opened adjacent to Flourish and Blotts. Rose arrived late, having been caught in a meeting with Minister Weasley about his upcoming travels to Belgium for a post-war summit on European wizarding relations. She was extremely tired and her head throbbed painfully as she fought her way through the daytime crowds.

Mick hadn't come back. Their fight, if it could really be called that, had happened two nights ago, and she hadn't heard a word from him since. It scared her. He wasn't the type to be so silent. She'd waited that evening for him to return, and to hug her, and to try to figure out what was bothering her, but he'd never shown up and she'd finally fallen asleep at two in the morning, although the sleep had not been restful. When he wasn't waiting for her when she'd Apparated into her flat after work the following evening, she'd simply cried, and then settled on the couch to stare into space. Sometime around midnight, she'd realized that she hadn't eaten anything, and fixed a piece of toast, which she'd promptly dropped on the floor.

She wasn't sure whether she was more upset with herself or with Mick. She knew now that she was being a bit silly in making such a big deal out of introducing him to her family. Her parents would most likely love him, considering he was a Gryffindor *and* Seamus's cousin.

"Rose! Over here!" Lavender was waving to her from a small table tucked underneath a staircase. She looked, as usual, very pretty, and her pale-pink beautician's robes shimmered as she waved. Her hairdo was quite elaborate for lunch, and Rose patted her own orderly bun self-consciously.

"Hi," said Rose, mumbling. "Sorry I'm late."

"No worries," Lavender answered brightly. "I've gone ahead and ordered us some brie with fruit *compote*. Sounds lovely, doesn't it? And I didn't know what you wanted to drink, but I thought maybe you'd want to split a bottle of Pinot Grigio—" She laughed when she saw Rose's face fall—Rose always had a difficult time masking her emotions around her sister—"One drink in the middle of the day is perfectly acceptable."

In truth, Rose didn't object to the drink—it always helped to keep her sarcasm in check when her sister started going on about fingernails and hair. And now Lavender had a legitimate reason—she was apprenticing at Pink Witches Beauty Salon and had even more amazing facts at her fingertips than before about how to dye eyelashes and make lip-gloss change color whenever the wearer felt like a kiss.

"It's not that," said Rose, groaning inwardly at the sophisticated tone her sister had affected ever since her marriage. Why not call it "red wine" and be done with it? "It's just that I'm more in the mood for some rum."

"Rum?" said Lavender, narrowing her eyes, and pretending to be suspicious. "Have you been spending time with Seamus?"

"No, why?" asked Rose, picking up the menu and holding it up so that she wouldn't have to look directly at her.

Lavender leaned in conspiratorially. "His family has a spell that will turn water into rum. He doesn't drink a lot, but we used to use it on occasion at Hogwarts to spike the pumpkin juice at the end of exams."

"Ahhh," said Rose, deciding that rum might not be very good for her at the moment; she was already flustered. "Well, it was just a thought. I'll share the wine with you."

Rose thought that Lavender looked vaguely disappointed.

By the time they'd finished their lunch, Rose was already late back to work, and the bottle of wine was more than half-empty. Her head was spinning, partially from the alcohol, and partially from her sister's rather long-winded, yet humorous account of Seamus's reluctant bonding with their new puppy. Overcome by a wave of emotion that rarely emerged without the help of something stronger than Butterbeer, Rose reached out to her sister and took a bit of the shiny pink fabric from her sleeve between her fingers. "This is pretty," she said softly. "I'm so glad you're my sister, Lavender."

"And I too," announced Lavender, trying to appear solemn, "am glad. To be sisters is a bond stronger than marriage." She drank her last drop of wine. "But don't tell Seamus, or he'll definitely take the dog back."

They both erupted into laughter and tried to control themselves when the waiter appeared. He asked them if they wanted any dessert, and when Rose asked if they had any strawberry sauce to put on the chocolate cake, he winked at her and said, "For a beautiful witch like you—anything."

Rose blushed and tried to look annoyed, and Lavender gaped at her. "See!" Lavender said, pointing an accusatory finger at Rose, "Men are falling at your feet! Don't tell me that there really aren't any boyfriends!"

"There aren't!" said Rose quickly, squirming a bit in her seat and suddenly regretting the decision for dessert. The wine felt like it was curdling everything in her stomach.

"I bet men throw themselves at you all the time!" squealed Lavender. Rose looked around to see if other people were listening. Sighing, Lavender propped her chin on her hand and looked at her sister with an expression of ... envy? "It must be so nice," she said softly. "I love Seamus, don't get me wrong, but at least you've had a chance to try out a few."

"I suppose," Rose answered, sitting up straighter. "But it's not all nice. There are reasons why things never seem to work out. You're lucky to have found the right person right away." She twirled the last drop of wine around in her glass, and said wistfully, "It seems like it took me forever."

"Ah-ha!" Lavender was now sitting up, hands clasped together tightly, a gleeful smile on her face. "Ah-ha!" she said again.

"What?" asked Rose, feeling very self-conscious. "What is it?" She began to wonder if she shouldn't hit Lavender with a Sobering Charm.

"You said, it took me forever'. *Past tense*. Who *is* he?" Lavender was practically jumping out of her chair.

"What? No I didn't. Nobody. *Shut UP*," she hissed.

Lavender looked incredibly smug. "Okay, I'm tired of teasing you. I want all the gossip. I saw you with Mick O'Malley in Bellibon last week."

Rose felt the tears start to form in her eyes and angrily wiped at them with her hand. She *hated* feeling like this—it was as though some spirit had invaded her mind and made her irrational and insecure. She prided herself on being honest, on telling the truth, no matter how blunt it might come across, and now she felt as though she had a million secrets bottled up inside of her. It was an awful, terrible, feeling, and all that Rose wanted to do was *tell* someone.

"We've been dating since your wedding," she admitted to Lavender in a very small voice.

She'd actually managed to shock her sister. Lavender's eyes were wide. "Since the *wedding*?" she asked. "That was almost four months ago! You've kept it quiet for that long?"

Rose just nodded, attempting a small smile for the waiter as he slid her dessert plate in front of her. They were both quiet until he left their table.

"Are you in love with him?" asked Lavender.

"I-I-*damn*!" Rose couldn't stop the tears now. She pursed her lips as hard as she could to try to hold it all in, but it was too much strain. She covered her mouth with her hands and nodded at Lavender, her shoulders shaking.

Lavender, whose need to give comfort and show affection superceded any pretense of putting up appearances, came around to Rose's side of the table and, kneeling, reached out to envelope her in a hug. "It's okay," she whispered, patting Rose on the back. When Rose finally stopped shaking, Lavender pulled away. "Have the two of you had a row?" she asked, looking concerned.

Rose nodded. "Right after you called the other night. He wanted me to invite him for Christmas."

"But he's already going to be there," Lavender said, looking confused.

"I *know*," said Rose, trying not to sound irritated. "But he wanted me to *invite* him. He wanted us to go ... together. And I—well, he asked me if I loved him, and when I didn't answer right away, he just left. But *honestly*," she rolled her eyes, "can't he *tell* how I feel?"

Much to Rose's annoyance, Lavender smirked, and then tried to mask her amusement with a calm-sounding voice. "Rose. No. People can't tell how you feel. I've known you my whole life and I don't know how you feel most of the time. Quite honestly, you're a little bit scary. It took me two years to convince Seamus that you don't hate him."

"But-why?"

"Because you *are* so honest. Don't get me wrong. I don't want you to change— you're my sister and I've always looked up to you. But sometimes... well, sometimes you're a little intimidating, that's all."

Rose felt her shoulders slump. There was no hope, really. She had nothing left to lose. Deciding to throw her self-respect into the trash bin, she confessed, "Lavender, I love him so much. But I've messed everything up. What am I going to *do*?"

"Why don't you just tell him? There are very few of us who have heart enough to be really in love without encouragement. He's probably feeling very insecure right now. You should just go to him and tell him that you love him, right now. Trust me, those three little words, if you mean them, will make all the difference in the world."

"I can't!"

"You can."

"I thought maybe you could fix my hair. That would make me feel better." For dramatic effect, Rose reached up and released her hair from the pins that were restraining it.

Lavender shook her head. "I'll fix it for your wedding."

Rose rolled her eyes, and suddenly, she felt very, very nervous, and more than a bit fidgety. "I should tell him now," she said slowly.

"You should," answered Lavender.

"I will," said Rose. And after fishing some gold out of her purse, she kissed her sister on the

cheek and ran out of the restaurant to Disapparate.

* * * * *

Rose arrived at the PAP headquarters a little out of breath. She was surprised that she hadn't splinched herself, and ran her fingers through her hair, which was not looking its best since she'd released it from the bun in the restaurant. She checked both of her hands as if to reassure herself that she was all there. She didn't feel like it.

The front room was, as usual, deserted. People rarely sat around in there unless there was a big meeting and the large desk in the corner of the room was empty. Rose walked over to it and sat down in the straight chair behind it, folding her hands primly in her lap. She checked her watch. Five after two. She still had almost two hours until Mick came off his shift. But after a minute of attempting to sit still, she pushed away from the desk and walked quickly over to the window. It had been sunny in Diagon Alley, but here it was grey and dim outside, and she could see the occasional light, and flares from the dragons, but little else, and besides, she knew that Mick and Viking generally flew on the far side of the island.

Leaning her head against the window, Rose could feel the cold wind creeping in through the panes of glass as it whispered against her throat. She closed her eyes and tried to figure out what she would say. What was it that Lavender had said?

"Damn!" she muttered, furrowing her brow. "Everyone needs encouragement—just tell him that you love him and the world will be a better place? URGH."

She had never felt so inexperienced in her whole life. Mick was going to laugh at her, she just knew it. He wasn't shy about his feelings. He let everything out—he'd told her that he loved her on their third date.

Maybe if she wrote down what she wanted to say, and practiced it, then she'd be all right. She looked at her watch again. A quarter past two. She strode purposefully over to the desk and rummaged around in the drawer.

She couldn't help but make a tutting noise when she realized that there were only some scraps to write on. Someone should really see about keeping the headquarters stocked better. The quill on the desk was dull, and she sharpened it with her wand, dipped it in the inkwell, and then watched as the ink dripped onto the paper.

Mick, she wrote. That was a good start. She would take his hands and say "Mick". Tapping the quill impatiently, she smiled a little, when she imagined Mick's response.

You can say my name, Rosie! See, it's not so difficult...

He was so frustrating. Maybe it would help to tell him exactly why she was in love with him. She wrote a row of numbers down her piece of paper. She could remember doing the same thing after her ex-boyfriend Steven had left. She'd cried herself to sleep for three nights in a row, and then, when she'd been unable to figure out in her head why she was so upset, she'd decided to write down the things she missed about him. Instead, the list had contained eighty-seven reasons why she was happy that he wasn't there anymore.

Rose's stomach clenched. What if that happened with Mick? What if, instead of writing down how much she loved the smell of his hair after a shower, or how she liked his dragon-riding outfit so much that she'd once tried on his spare when he'd been at work, she wrote down that his boots didn't smell so pleasant or that sometimes he had a tendency to show off? It was true, she reflected, his boots did smell terrible, and ...

She shook her head. That wasn't important. Under number one, she wrote, *Smelly boots not important*. That was already one more good thing than she'd managed to think of for Steven. Feeling pleased with herself, she started to write.

The sound of loud male laughter coming from the direction of the locker rooms made Rose nearly fall out of her chair. She steadied herself and looked with narrowed eyes towards the corridor. Charlie. Well, she should have assumed he would be there—his shift started immediately after Mick's. She checked her watch again. Three o'clock. Only one more hour. She hoped that Charlie would stay in the back until the last minute. Biting on the top of her quill, she thought for a moment, and then wrote down: *17. Best friend hates me, but he doesn't seem to mind.*

Her hopes were dashed, however, when Charlie laughed again, and a moment later, Cho Chang ran into the front room, a model dragon clutched in her hand. She skidded to a halt when she saw Rose, only to be knocked down by Charlie, who obviously hadn't expected her to stop so suddenly. The two of them climbed off the floor, and Rose noticed that Charlie's face was quite red, although Cho regained her composure and said "Hello Rose!" very sweetly.

"He's not off for another hour," said Charlie. Rose hastily folded her list and pulled another scrap of parchment out of the drawer. Sitting up, as straight as she possibly could, she answered with as

little emotion in her voice as she could manage. "I know, but I wanted to be here when he finished, and I've just been catching up on some work. It's quiet here."

"Uh-huh," said Charlie, his eyes darting around the room. "Where's your briefcase then?"

Rose didn't feel like answering him. She felt a pang of panic, thinking that she'd left her case in the restaurant, although she quickly remembered that she hadn't bothered to bring it with her to lunch.

She refreshed the ink on her quill and wrote on her new piece of parchment, *Ministry Memo...* "I don't carry my briefcase everywhere, Charlie," she answered after a moment. "Although I *should*," she continued. "This headquarters is very poorly stocked with office supplies."

"Well," said Charlie, not bothering to hide the sarcasm in his voice, "we've used them all up writing reports up on our dragons, haven't we?"

Rose was about to retort but was saved by Cho, who had always been very nice to her. "I agree," she said. "I refilled the parchment last week. I'd needed some earlier to plot some flight patterns and couldn't find it anywhere. I'll pick up some more tomorrow, shall I?" Then, with another sweet smile, she nodded to Rose, and pulled Charlie back down the corridor with her, asking him if he'd go out to the dragon hangar a bit early with her to look at something in one of the holding pens.

Reprimanding herself for letting Charlie Weasley get under her skin, she shook out her hands and added number eighteen. *I love him despite the fact that his best friend is an obnoxious git with the behavior of a first-year.* She crumpled up the fake memo, and continued to add to her list.

Loud booming noises from outside alerted Rose to the fact that the dragon shifts were getting ready to change over. Several bright flashes illuminated the window glass, and Rose cringed involuntarily. She still couldn't quite believe that anyone would be crazy enough to ride on a dragon, and she was torn between wanting to catch a glimpse of Mick on Viking, and not wanting to look at all. She wondered if Mick had really pasted her picture to Viking's harness like he'd said he had. Well, she wouldn't be able to see it out of the window anyway.

Rose looked over her list one more time—she'd made it to twenty-nine—which was fitting, as it was also her age—and stood up. She was very, very nervous, and her heart felt as though it were beating outside her body when she heard the front door to the headquarters opening.

She was partly disappointed, but mostly relieved, when she saw Draco Malfoy enter the room. He didn't look surprised to see her—she wondered if his face ever truly showed any emotion—and nodded to her instead.

Clearing her throat, she asked, "How is your dragon being kept, Mr. Malfoy? Are the new keepers adequate?"

"Quite," he answered. "No thanks to Weasley or O'Malley." He looked as though he might say more, but stopped when the door opened a second time, and Harry Potter entered.

Rose was shocked by his appearance. He looked—old. Or, older. His face was grey, and there were thin strands of white hair sticking out very clearly against the black. He barely registered Rose's presence and followed Draco towards the locker rooms. The third person through that door would have to be Mick. Rose grew more agitated, and peered out the window, thinking about how ill Harry Potter had looked, and despising herself for not ever taking into account how stressful it must be for Mick to be out on the dragons all day long. She'd just assumed that Mick, being used to dragons, was going out every day and enjoying himself. She'd forgotten about the Dementors, and the weather, and people like Malfoy, and...

The sound of the heavy door slamming made Rose stand up straight, but she didn't turn around.

"Ro—," Mick cleared his throat. "Miss Brown? Here on Ministry business?"

Miss Brown? He'd never, ever called her that. It was always "Rosie" or "Rose" or, when he made half-hearted attempts to be polite, "Miss Secretary Privy". Rose opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out. She shook her head instead, concentrating very hard on the paint on the windowsill.

There was silence for a few moments. *At least he's not walking away*, thought Rose, willing herself to turn around. Mick was closer than she'd expected. His hair was a mess, and his broomstick was flung over one shoulder. He was twirling it, and not looking at her.

"Well, what could possibly bring you to Azkaban in the middle of a work day, if not official Ministry business?"

His voice sounded bitter.

"I wanted to talk to you."

"Right. Well, I know I've left some things at your flat. I can collect them now, if you'd like."

Rose had a sudden vision of her flat, not as it had been before Mick, but rather, as a grim, empty space, with white walls and no furniture. Empty. She whispered, "No, that's not why I—"

"Interesting." Draco Malfoy entered the room again, dressed in some of the nicest everyday robes that Rose had ever seen. An expression that could only be called a sneer was on his face. "When you said you'd see to it that Mordor was well looked after, I had no idea what drastic measures you'd resort to. Really—" He looked Mick up and down and let out a short laugh, "It wasn't necessary."

"Right, that's it—" Mick had thrown down his broom in disgust, but Rose was at his side before he could take another step towards Malfoy, who, Rose noticed, had edged back towards the corridor.

"Mick," she said gently, taking one hand and attempting to pull him with her towards a corner. It was like trying to move one of the pillars in front of Gringotts.

Reaching for Mick's other hand, she moved to stand in front of him, forming a human barrier between Mick and Malfoy. A moment later, she heard a *pop!* from behind her. Turning, she saw that Draco was gone.

"Coward," Mick muttered. "Disapparating—well, I know where he works, don't I?"

Rose laughed. Mick pulled his hands from hers and stuffed them into his pockets. "So," he said, a trace of the former bitterness in his voice, "What's up?"

Rose tried to push away the hurt that she felt when he withdrew his hands. He obviously didn't want to talk, or even be around her. He was probably relieved that she'd given him an easy way out. How could she have let Lavender talk her into this? She wanted to believe that he might actually-love her—but now that she was standing here, trying to talk, and not getting any response, Rose felt all of her insecurities surge to the forefront.

Mimicking his gesture, she shoved her own hands in the pockets of her robes, and felt the list that she'd created earlier. Hesitantly, she pulled it out and unfolded it. Gripping it tightly with both of her hands, she held it up so that it concealed her face, and said, in a shaky voice, "I wanted to tell you something."

"I'm listening."

"Okay," said Rose. But her lip had started trembling, and her hands were shaking, and she knew she wouldn't be able to get through it.

"Damn!" she said, stamping her foot. "Damn! Damn! Damn!" Mick was now staring at her, and his expression softened to one of slight amusement.

"I know you can swear better than that," he said.

"I know," she said, taking the handkerchief that he handed to her. "I'm a bloody idiot and a coward. Here." She thrust the list at him, then went to lean against the desk, her arms crossed. "I took some notes."

"On what?" asked Mick, taking the piece of parchment, looking puzzled.

"Oh! Just read it!" Rose said, stamping her foot.

Mick looked down and Rose watched his eyes scan the parchment. "My boots smell?" he said, sounding offended. "Like what?"

"I don't know," answered Rose, looking at the boots. "Wet. Like mildew. I even tried to charm the smell away but it didn't work—it just ate away at the lining and then I had to repair it."

"Hmph," said Mick, and then was silent for a minute as he read through the list. Rose pulled out her wand and cleaned the handkerchief, and then occupied herself by folding it and unfolding it in various fancy patterns. She felt oddly numb, and very tired.

"Rosie?" She snapped her head up. That was number twenty-three—how much she secretly loved her nickname.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Number twenty-nine?"

"Yes?" Taking a step forward, Rose took hold of one of Mick's hands.

"I—I want to hear you say it." Mick looked suddenly shy.

Feeling as if a weight had already been lifted off of her shoulders, she said, "Mick?"

"That's my name."

"I know. I love you."

"Sorry? Didn't *quite* catch that. You what?"

She squeezed his hand and laughed. "I love you, Mick."

"Even though I am obsessed with disgusting creatures that make your skin crawl?"

"Yes. I still love you." Rose found that the more she said it, the easier it became, although she meant it more each time.

"Even though I'm an arrogant Gryffindor bastard?"

Rose cringed. That had been number eight.

"Yes."

"Well, all right then." Mick put his arms around her, and she prepared for what she thought would be a kiss, but before their lips could meet, Mick whispered, "I love you too. Let's get married."

He tried to kiss her then, but Rose stood back to look at him, unable to stop gaping.

"What did you say?" she asked, furrowing her brow.

"You heard me."

This time, he grabbed her shoulders and wouldn't let her escape a kiss, and she felt herself carried away with the intensity.

"When?" asked Rose, when they stopped for air. She didn't see the need for further discussion or clarification. Suddenly, it all made perfect sense to her.

"Whenever you want. You name the date, I'll name the place. Deal?"

Well, thought Rose, if this was a dream, it was the strangest one she'd ever had. She might as well test its limits. "How about now?"

"Now?"

"Well, we'd have to register with the Ministry at some point, but you can do the wands any time. And imagine the look on our parents' faces at Christmas. We can have the party later."

"All right," said Mick, and Rose surreptitiously pinched herself to make sure that she really wasn't dreaming. "Now I have to decide where." He closed his eyes, as though deep in thought, but opened them again very quickly. "Got it!" he said brightly. "Where's your cloak?"

She *had* left that at the restaurant. "I didn't bring it," she admitted. "But if we're going to Diagon Alley, I can just -"

Mick was shaking his head and pointing his wand in the direction of the locker rooms. "*Accio cloak*," he said, and a very large, pea-green cloak came floating into the room. "My old one," he explained, as he wrapped it around her shoulders.

It was quite warm and heavy, but it smelled like Mick, and so Rose didn't mind. "Where're we going?" she asked, as he led her to the door. She had a sudden vision of the two of them performing the wand-crossing ceremony on the snow-covered hill above the lake at Hogwarts. Or maybe near the Three Broomsticks, where they'd shared their first kiss the night of Lavender's wedding? He'd said that they weren't going to Diagon Alley, so it couldn't be one of the parks there...Rose was half-afraid that he'd take her to Magical Menagerie.

But he didn't mean to take her anywhere far, because they were going outside. He still had his broomstick. Where were they going that they couldn't Apparate?

The force of the wind nearly knocked Rose over when they stepped outside, even though Mick was gripping her tightly at the waist. She was starting to have a not-so-good feeling about this. Maybe this was a dream after-all. It was turning out like most of her dreams did—unpleasant and stressful.

Mick's broomstick was now hovering in mid-air next to them. It was amazing that it didn't blow away instantly, but Rose supposed that there must have been several wind-resistant charms placed on it. Mick pulled her closer to it, but she kept her feet rooted firmly in the same soot. "Where are we going?" she demanded. She had to shout because the wind was so strong.

"Someplace new and exciting—for you, anyway." Mick shouted back, lifting her onto the broom. *Damn him for being so strong*, she thought. He settled onto the broom in front of her and yelled back, "Hold tight!"

"Mick O'Malley!" she yelled, and she could barely hear herself—they were flying now, close to the water, and the wind was rushing past her ears. "I am NOT getting onto that dragon. Are you crazy?"

"Rosie," he shouted back, "don't you trust me? Trust is the basis of every relationship." He made the broom dip a bit, and Rose, who had always loved flying—on broomsticks anyway—had to admit that this bit, so far, was fun.

With amazing skill, Mick managed to steer the broom with one hand, while removing his wand from his pocket with the other. He pointed it at his ear and said a spell that Rose couldn't hear. A moment later he was shouting into seemingly thin air, "That's right, don't let him settle yet! Give him some leaping toadstools—just a few—so he'll be ready for us when we land."

Mick turned his head slightly to address Rose. "We can take Viking out on the periphery. There's room enough for ten dragons to fly in this area, if we wanted, so we don't have to worry about interfering with any PAP business."

"Perhaps you didn't hear me, Mick," Rose shouted. They were now circling the dragon hangars, and a particularly nasty one with a large ridge down its back was sending shots of fire into the air. The Chinese Fireball that she recognized as the Malfoy family dragon, on the other hand, was curled up and sleeping so peacefully that from that far above, it resembled a vibrantly-colored kitten. Rose's could feel her words getting lost in the wind, but continued to shout, "There is NO

way I'm getting on one of those things—now I mean it! Land this broom. It isn't funny!"

Turning his head again, Mick raised a finger and put it to his lips. "Shhhh..." he shouted. "You'll excite them." Rose looked down again in time to see four keepers simultaneously attempt to hit the dragon with the ridged-back with some sort of spell between its eyes. They looked well-enough excited already. "There's only one rule!" he continued, and as he spoke, Rose did not fail to notice that they were slowly coasting downward. "Never tickle a sleeping dragon. Remember that, and you'll do fine."

Rose cast about for something to say—anything—that would make Mick realize how absolutely terrified she felt. But she could think of nothing, and as the broom slowed even further, she found that all she could do was scoot closer to Mick and bury her head in his shoulder. She felt ridiculous, but she could *not* look, and this was the next best thing. She felt the broomstick moving slowly in circles, and she also felt what she imagined to be the heat of fire from a dragon's snout waft across her back, and after a few moments, she realized that the sinking feeling was gone from her stomach, and she felt oddly safe and tranquil.

Perhaps I just fell off the broom and died, she thought. Then she amused herself by adding, in her head, *30: He killed me, but I still love him.*

"Rosie?" said a voice close to her ear.

"Yes," she answered, her voice muffled. She did not look up.

"Rosie—look!"

"No. You can bring me out here, but you can't make me look." Rose noticed that they appeared to be hovering in one spot, and that it was suddenly much warmer than it had been. The wind was much quieter and Mick was speaking in a normal voice. She closed her eyes even tighter.

"Oi, Mick, what's Charlie going to say?" Rose heard an unfamiliar male voice very close to her ear. Someone must have flown up to join them. Rose turned her head and opened one eye. A young-looking dragon-keeper was hovering next to them, holding a helmet and some other gear in one hand.

"Official Ministry business," said Mick, with an authoritative tone that Rose never knew he possessed. "Inspection." He took the helmet from the boy and handed it to Rose.

"Privy Brown—you'll be needing to use the helmet and goggles." When Rose didn't move to take the items herself, Mick reached with one hand out to them, and plopped the goggles on her head. There was nothing to do but pull them on, which Rose did very quickly with one hand. It was a good thing that Lavender hadn't fixed her hair.

"We're just going to take Viking out on the borders," said Mick, adjusting Rose's goggles for her, and then plopping an oversized helmet on her head. "We'll be down in a second to mount him. Go ahead and secure one of the training seats for Privy Brown."

"Yes, sir," said the keeper, and took a steep dive towards the dragon pen.

Mick had dug out his own helmet and goggles from the rucksack he'd brought with him, and turned to her. Rose could feel the twinkle in his eyes, even if she couldn't really see them very clearly. "We've only got to wear these until we get onto Viking." He tapped the hard helmet with his fist. "But we should really wear the goggles the whole time. You never know when the wind might blow a blast of dragon fire your way."

Rose's mouth dropped open, and her stomach ended up somewhere in her throat as Mick yelled "Hold on!" and they took a steep dive. A moment later, they were hovering next to a pair of seats. Rose couldn't actually *see* the dragon—if she hadn't known what it was, then she wouldn't have suspected. From her vantage point, they were simply hovering next to a very unusual air carriage.

"Reilly! Give us a hand, will you?" Mick shouted down to the boy who had helped them earlier. "Hold onto the Secretary and see to it that she doesn't plummet to her death," said Mick.

Before Rose could slap him, Reilly grabbed hold of her, and Mick clambered off of the broomstick and into the back seat. Rose didn't like the look of that. There was nothing in the front to hide behind except what appeared to be the scaly, thick neck of a dragon. Reilly slowly nudged the broomstick closer to the dragon, and Mick reached out for Rose. She instinctively stiffened. "Up a bit higher," Mick instructed Reilly, and soon the broomstick was level with the seat in the front. All that Rose had to do was shift a bit, but she stayed put. Mick laughed.

"Looks like the Secretary Privy might be afraid of dragons, Reilly, what do you think?" Reilly gave a nervous laugh, and Rose lifted her chin in the air. "Mr. O'Malley," she said, in as haughty a tone as she could muster, "I most certainly am *not*." With a deep breath, she slid into the seat.

She could feel Mick's big grin. "Thanks," he said to Reilly, and then swiftly attached their broomstick to a clip below them. Mick reached over the seat and helped her attach two belts across her chest. "Very romantic," she said. "I've always dreamed of riding off into the sunset with my knight wearing goggles and a seatbelt."

"Shut it," said Mick, though his voice was gentle. "You'll love it."

Surprisingly, now that they were *on* the dragon, Rose didn't feel quite so afraid. The seat was much more comfortable than that of a broomstick, and she had to admit that the harnesses made her feel very secure. She could feel them rise and fall slowly as Viking breathed, but he seemed...docile. She found that she was actually quite curious about how things worked.

"Shouldn't you be in front?" she asked, turning her head to try and see Mick.

"Nah," he said. "This way, you get hit with the full blast of the flames..." he held up a hand, "I'm kidding! But look, I hold onto the reigns at the sides. It doesn't matter if I sit in the front or back to direct him."

"Alright," said Rose, though she felt very exposed sitting in the front. She focused on Mick's hands, which she could see below her, and hugged herself tightly when there was a rather aggressive lurch from below. "Aughghgh!" she said, before she could stop herself. "What was that?"

"Just taking off," answered Mick, and she could see the reigns grow tight. Suddenly, Rose was aware of something large and towering in front of her. Viking's head was up. His long, bright-green neck was as thick as three trees, and Rose felt as though enclosed in a room. Up above, she could see his relatively small, yet ferocious looking head. She focused her attention on the front of the seating apparatus, and gasped when she saw that Mick had, indeed, pasted her photograph to the top of it. She gave a small, romantic sigh. Mick loosened the slack on the reigns, and Rose was aware of a gentle rocking and breeze, as Viking's wings flapped rhythmically below them.

"It'll get better," said Mick. "When we reach a good cruising altitude, he'll lower his neck a bit and you'll be able to see in front of you."

Rose wasn't sure if that would be better or not, but she decided to take his word for it. "It's warm," she said. "There's supposed to be a heating charm on the seats, right?"

"Yeah," Mick said. "There's a heating charm, and also a water-repelling charm. It's like we're in an enclosed room, but you can still feel the wind. The whole seat-apparatus is attached with real straps, and extra-binding charms, so they can withstand pretty much everything. It's safer than walking down the street."

Some people were *obviously* crazy, thought Rose, although she did find it interesting to actually see all the charms in action. She'd read about them in the official PAP Implementation Report, but hadn't really given much thought to how they worked in real life.

She closed her eyes for a few minutes and allowed herself to feel what was going on. It *was* relaxing. She had an overwhelming urge to remove her helmet and goggles and feel the warm breeze hit her face. She was just deciding how to ask Mick if she could remove her helmet *without* being teased, when she heard something that sounded like a very gentle hum from in front of them. She strained her ears, trying to figure out if that noise was from the wind, or from something else. It slowly grew louder and louder until it resembled something similar to a gong that had been hit several times and was continuously reverberating. "What is that?" she shouted, after a moment, but she never finished her sentence, because she saw in front of her two thin, but powerful-looking jets of fire shooting out from Viking's nostrils. She gasped again.

"He likes you!" Mick said, excitedly. "He's happy! Look at him!"

"Breathing fire is a sign of happiness?" Rose asked, with heavy sarcasm. "What was that noise?" she repeated.

"It was Viking!" Mick answered. "It was the dragon equivalent of a cat purring. He approves of you, I guess."

"Was that my test?" Rose asked. "Were you going to use me as dragon fodder if Viking didn't like me?"

"Maybe," answered Mick. "Here we go..."

They had apparently reached a good cruising level, and Mick turned Viking around, and the dragon's head lowered obediently, so that Rose could see Azkaban far off in the distance. It looked almost pretty, with its turrets and towers blurred by the goggles and the distance.

Mick latched the reigns into a lock below them. They continued to rise and fall, as Viking flapped his wings. Rose felt the seat wobble a bit, and the next thing she knew, her whole chair was turning, until she was facing Mick. She gasped.

"Neat, eh?" he asked, pulling off his helmet and hanging it on the back of the chair. "It took years and years of training to get this far," Mick said, proudly. "Centuries, really. We're lucky that the final steps in training happened during our lifetime." He reached over and pulled off Rose's helmet and goggles. She smiled. He was right. He'd apparently been right about everything since they'd met. They *were* lucky.

Releasing himself from his own restraints, Mick scooted forward. He leaned in to kiss her, but not before whispering, "I told you that you'd love it."

"I love *you*," said Rose, as his lips met hers. She loved riding the dragon, too, but she decided not to tell him that. She didn't want his head to get any bigger than it already was, and she also didn't want to end up living in a hut on top of a dragon. She'd go anywhere with Mick, but there were limits...

Homecomings

Ronald A. Weasley
(genius)
Office of Prosecution and Defense
Ministry of Magic

To: Miss Hermione Granger
From: Mr. Ronald Weasley
Regarding: Your Return

Hullo, love. I'm hoping Pig will overcome his natural stupidity and manage to put this in your hand before you leave Cortona. Right before you leave Cortona. Seconds before. Look, just get out of there, would you? I want you home—but I don't want you getting any shocks to your system when you arrive, so let me tell you how things are around here now:

Sirius works his head off, of course. But he cracks every once in awhile, and it's nice to have a boss you can have a couple of pints with while you're wracking your brains for solutions. I can just hear you. "Perhaps you wouldn't have to wrack your brains quite so hard if you hadn't had quite so many pints." It's nothing to worry about though, is it? You're going to come home and do all my Thinking for me from now on, so I can go ahead and waste myself. Heh.

Remus seems to be doing well. His last transformation was fine, anyway. He teaches Ginny too many things for her own good. But all in all, I think it was a great decision, her staying in Stagsden to take her seventh year. It's been nice, having her to abuse. Reckon we won't send her back just yet. Anyway, she's probably kept in touch with you, and even if she hasn't, she'll have to tell you all her own news.

The rest of my family's fine. The twins' shop is bringing in more Galleons than this family has ever seen, and those two sods are hoarding every single one. Charlie's still crazy. Penelope and Leo still live at the Burrow. Mum and Dad are okay. Mum was a bit sad that you took up Remus' offer to continue living at Lupin Lodge. Now that I think of it, I am too. I thought you were going to be living at the Notch.

Bill's finished working at Gringotts, but he's hanging about London anyway. He says he promised Dad and Charlie he'd help with the Dementors, and he's not leaving till that's taken care of. I have a feeling he's hanging about for a shorter, blonder reason than Dad or Charlie, but if I say who, you won't like it. So I'd better just say. Remember Fleur Delacour? Well, she's been working up in Diagon Alley too, and Bill's noticed. I've seen her once or twice. From AFAR. And you can take your little nose right out of the air, because I know you and Krum are still "friends". And don't try saying "We only write letters, Ron!" because I've seen the sorts of things you put in your letters. Not that I'm complaining.

Harry's arm is fine—those Cannons mediwizards are as good as Madam Pomfrey. He's back up on the dragons full time. You'd think he'd go back to Quidditch after that ripping debut, but you know how he is. We bachelor it up at night, though, yes, always getting lairy. Chess, tea, passing out at half nine—right couple of madmen, we are. Honestly, you've got to come back and stop us getting old. It's pathetic. At least Harry isn't, you know, bad though. He's just middling.

Your Mum and Dad are looking fine. They really are. I put Christmas decorations in their room and it looks cheerful in there. I sorted out the health bills, too—you should've seen me trying to change that cheque you sent me into wizard money. Goblins don't trust Muggle money in the first place, and any little bit of paper without a watermark throws them right off, especially if it's got the names of two people on it, and neither one of them

is you. They were asking me for Granger identification as if they'd never seen me. Started muttering about Polyjuice Potion. Good thing Bill was there, or I might've found myself in the interrogation chambers.

That's everything. Everyone's tripping over themselves getting ready to welcome you home. You don't know how strange it is here without you. I can't take it anymore, I had a nightmare the other night that you were Petrified. So get on a Knight Bus, take the Floo Network, Apparate, fly a carpet, ride a broom, hell, ride a hippogriff, just strap on your bags and COME HOME.

And remember, if for some reason you change your mind and decide to stay, I won't be able to keep away. I really couldn't give a dead rat's arse about your meditations at the minute. I'll show you meditation. Or at least, you'll have your eyes shut and you won't be saying much for awhile.

Damn. I love you.

-Ron

P.S. Fine. I secretly enjoy Hogwarts: A History, if only because every time I see it anywhere, in a shop, on a shelf, in a library (yes, I go to libraries, shut it) I think of you.

Guess you have to go to a Cannons game now, don't you? AND wave an orange sparkler, don't think I've forgotten. I bought you a jumper, too, with great big C's on the front. Might be a bit small, come to think of it. Pity, that. Love, Ron

Hermione read the letter again from top to bottom, stunned that the day of departure had arrived. She had given up hope that it would ever come, and now that it had, she felt strange and detached. Pig had been more excited two days ago than she had ever seen him; he'd zoomed from ceiling to floor and from wall to wall in a hyperactive frenzy of joy. She had kissed his tousled feathers and sent Ron back a very short note, stating when she thought she would arrive. He'd have that note by now. And she would see him in a matter of hours.

Hours.

Hermione looked at her rucksack, which she had been forced to magically enlarge, in order to fit into it her accumulated Thinking supplies and notes, along with everything that Ron had sent her over the past four months. Letters. Pictures. Books. Quidditch periodicals. The Omnioculars on which he'd saved Harry's match for her. She still couldn't believe that, in the midst of a Cannons game with Harry in it, Ron had thought of her. He was such a wonderful, great big prat. With wonderful hair and eyes and mouth and hands, and a wonderful, *wonderful* voice that she would be hearing again by nightfall. Right in her ear. She shivered, and wondered what it would be like, for those first five minutes—that first hour. The first night.

She glanced in the mirror and watched her reflection. She knew she looked different. She'd never been so tanned, and yesterday she'd caught the sun across her nose and shoulders, just enough to make her glow. Saltwater and sunshine had done wonders for her hair; she knew its new texture wouldn't last in England but at least for now the old brown mop lay in long, fat tendrils on her back, and glinted with natural highlights no potion could purchase. She surveyed her shoulders and arms, dark against the slim, loose whiteness of her Cortona robes, and considered putting on a cloak but decided against it. She wouldn't be in cold climates for long, and she wanted Ron to see her just like this. She wondered when she'd ever been so pretty—or perhaps the mirror and her mind were playing tricks on her. Perhaps it was only the promise of knowing how pretty Ron would find her that made her feel so beautiful.

She turned from the mirror, smoothed her bedcovers one last time, plucked her diary from her pillow and tucked it into the top of her bag, then shut it, buckled it and, after casting a Weightless Enchantment, slung it easily onto her back and ventured into the corridor. It was time to say goodbye.

Delia was waiting on the patio where they had studied, her dark hair a shock against the vibrant blue of her chair's cushion. She looked almost like a stranger to Hermione, who had grown used to her dark features and deep eyes but saw them now as if for the first time. There was a familiar crookedness to the slim nose; an odd pallor to the fine skin, making her look as if she spent more time indoors than out, which made no sense at all. Hermione shook her head. She was making the oddest observations—for the first time it occurred to her that she would miss Delia, who stood as she approached and looked at her with bright eyes.

A windchime sang softly in the distance and the sea crashed beyond the patio, resounding among the marble columns and filling Hermione's ears with its lulling rhythm. She had grown so used to that.

"Time, then?"

"Yes." Hermione wasn't certain what to do. Delia had always been warm and open, but somehow

it didn't seem right to hug her. She settled for putting out her hand. "Thank you for everything. I'll do my best to use it, though I don't—"

"Shh." Delia squeezed her hand, and Hermione relaxed. "We will see each other again... I know your reservations where the Orb is concerned, but perhaps you will trust me if I tell you that I have observed that much in its depths."

Hermione smiled. "If *you* say so then I..." She shook her head. "I'm sure we'll see each other again. I'll write to you."

"I know." Delia's eyes swept Hermione's face, then gazed away to the sea. For a moment, Hermione thought she could see a terrible loneliness in Delia's expression, and then it was gone again. Her eyes returned to Hermione. "Thank you for being my student, and for teaching me."

It was better not to argue. Delia believed that the exchange had been mutual, and though Hermione disagreed, she was glad that her apprenticeship had not seemed a total waste to her instructor. "I'll miss it here," she said quietly. It was the truth.

"You are always welcome." Delia paused. "I... wish you success, child. I know what you intend to try and I do not know if there is a way. But if there is, then you will find it."

Hermione nodded. She felt a prickling sensation behind her eyes. "Thank you," she managed.

Delia released her hand. "We have all suffered our losses," she said, so softly that Hermione hardly heard her. "I hope that yours, at least, may be restored to you."

Hermione stood still, her eyes focused on nothing, her mind a blur. She had never asked after Delia's losses. And now it was too late—but they would see each other again.

"Travel safely," Delia murmured. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye." Hermione turned and walked slowly through the great villa for the last time, taking the twists and turns of the long, cool corridors without seeing them at all. It was not until she reached the Portkey to the world outside Cortona that she began, in spite of her best intentions, to cry.

* * * * *

Ron rubbed his eyes and squinted at the scratchy handwriting in the ledger on the desk in front of him. Twilight filtered through the skylight in the center of the ceiling of the Ministry Archives, casting a dull grey light over everything in the room. The only brightness came from Ron's wand, which was suspended in mid-air above the table, illuminating the pages.

A shadow creeping across the table made him jump, and he looked up to see the Ministry archivist standing a few feet away, his face highlighted by the light coming from his own wand, which he was holding up like a lantern. The archivist refused to allow torches or candles inside the reading room, and because of this, everyone else had left with the sun.

"We're closing in fifteen minutes," said Mr. Doyle. "Do you want copies of anything?"

Breathing an inner sigh of relief, and determined not to stay a moment longer than necessary, Ron closed the ledger, still careful so as not to make Mr. Doyle twitch, and shook his head. "I've finished with this year. I'm glad I wasn't around in 1478—" he let out a low whistle—"You wouldn't believe some of the things that are listed in here." He tapped the cover of the book, which read *Inventory of Dark Objects Confiscated by the Ministry of Magic, 1478. Appended 1512 to Include Objects in Possession of Known Dark Wizards*. A cloud of red dust flew up in his face, and Mr. Doyle sighed before reaching to place the heavy volume on the trolley next to him. Ron moved his hand quickly—he still wasn't quite sure what he was allowed to touch and what he wasn't.

"Did you manage to get those books from the German Ministry yet?" Ron asked, standing, and reaching for his wand. Mr. Doyle shook his head. "They say you've got to go there to look at them. But that you're perfectly welcome whenever you want to go."

"Right," said Ron, frowning. He wouldn't be able to make the trip until after Christmas, and he hoped that would be good enough for Sirius. He didn't want to exhaust himself in the next few days with long Apparition journeys—he needed all of his energy for Hermione, who would be home... *soon*. He closed his eyes for a moment and smiled. Hermione would be home in an hour, if all went well with her travels. And all he had to do was drop his notes off with Sirius, retrieve the present he had finally purchased earlier that day in Diagon Alley, and head for Lupin Lodge. His stomach growled and he wondered if Hermione would want to have some tea after all of that traveling. That would be fine. Everyone could do their catching up over tea, and then they could just leave the room so that he and Hermione could finally have some time... alone.

"Mr. Weasley? Mr. Weasley?" Mr. Doyle's voice brought him back to reality, and he opened his eyes to find that his wand was still lit and shining directly at the archivist.

"Sorry," he said. "Nox. I don't know if I'll be back before Christmas. But if you can think of

anywhere else that might have listings of Dark objects, families with histories of interest in the Dark Arts, or *anything*, will you let me know?"

"Actually, I was doing some research on your research this afternoon, and I came up with a few ideas, but they're a bit roundabout."

"Really?" asked Ron. "What are they?"

Mr. Doyle motioned for Ron to follow him to the main desk, and when they reached it, he pulled a roll of parchment from his robes and spread it across the surface of the table. It was covered in notes.

"We've pulled the obvious records—the ledgers from the earlier Ministry law agencies and the more recent records from the M.L.E.S.—you haven't finished looking through all of those yet. Then there are the items from outside Britain. Really, to do a thorough job, you shouldn't limit yourself to the German records—you should go to France, Switzerland, and *definitely* Eastern Europe and Russia. My friend Pavol is an archivist for the Czech Ministry Archives and he owed a list over today of places where you might find information. Now, bear in mind, the documents will be in Czech, but you can probably hire a translator or use a translation charm to do the research there. The chances are slim that you'll find much account of items of *British* origin, but you can't rule it out, and I don't want to feel I've let you down. Now..."

Ron tried to look interested, and crossed his fingers in hope that Mr. Doyle would hand over his notes at the end of his speech, which, once he got going, could take a while. "Er, yes," he said, shifting to stand straighter. "We're mainly interested in objects that may have been in possession of *British* wizards and witches. And that book from 1478 was really informative, but I don't think we need to look at anything that old from other countries. We're more interested in more recent records, like from the last three hundred years or so." Actually, Ron thought Sirius would probably be interested in everything, but he'd only just started to realize that sometimes it was better to provide Sirius with a summary, rather than too much detailed information. Sirius had a tendency to...fixate.

"Yes, I realized that, and I realize the importance of connecting the objects to the families. So I was thinking, we do have quite a few manuscript collections here, although you may find more at the Library of Magic. Really, they should all be there—it's our job to maintain the official records of the Ministry of Magic, and not the personal papers of individuals. But, nonetheless, we do have several collections that contain correspondence and diaries, and you never know when someone just might allude to a Dark object in their possession, or Dark magic in general. And sometimes they kept their own family ledgers, especially if they owned a large manor house. Of course, more often than not, they're quite boring. A lot of people were more interested in recording how many pounds of Floo powder they went through in a month, or how much food their house-elves consumed. But it would be worth a look..."

The sound of the clock chiming four drowned Mr. Doyle's voice. Ron wanted nothing more than to be out of the room and on his way home. He was starting to fidget, and although Mr. Doyle was only being helpful, Ron felt a sudden urge to hit him with a silencing charm and make a break for it. He willed himself to be patient, although he did walk back to his table and begin to gather his pieces of parchment together. Mr. Doyle followed, and continued talking.

"It might not be a bad idea to look at *Muggle* records. There are ways to get you into the British Library, or the Public Records Office at Kew, and you can always check the legislation books in Parliament. Of course, that would be a last-ditch effort, but sometimes you find valuable information in those Muggle documents. I was reading a diary of a nineteenth century woman in Bath who reported that she'd dreamt that she'd seen the ghost of a man in 'bright tights and an oiled beard' do a dance in front of her bed one night. She nearly drove herself crazy trying to figure out who could be haunting her house. Well, *I* knew who it was. Old Benjamin Carroll went a bit crazy near the end. Thought it was fun to parade around as a ghost, but he never bothered to actually get the costume correct. It's a bit of a famous case. He was eventually captured by the folks in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department, well, it was the 'Mistreatment of Muggle Relics' department back then, and a large part of the records in that fond use him as an example of what can happen when we start to lose our minds. Mediresearchers at St. Mungo's use those records. You wouldn't think, would you, that the records from the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department would be useful to *mediresearchers*, but they are! You see, you never know..."

Ron had lost track of Mr. Doyle's monologue several sentences back, but he snapped to attention at the mention of his father's old department. Despite the time, Ron had to ask, "Really? So you think that information in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts records might be of use? That's a brilliant idea!"

Mr. Doyle looked taken aback. "I... er... I wasn't saying that, actually." He hit his head with his

hand and gave an exasperated sigh. "Although I can't believe I didn't think of that." He picked up a quill from the desk, and began to scribble a few more notes on the little bit of white space left on his parchment. "But you know, those records, although very complete, are very difficult to read. That's one of the challenges, as I'm sure you've noticed, with this type of research—you never know when you'll be at the mercy of some clerk who never bothered to study penmanship. And in recent years, especially, the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department was scaled down in terms of staffing—never had an official clerk, and whoever was keeping the records had the worst handwriting I'd ever seen."

"I'm sure I wouldn't have a problem with the handwriting, Mr. Doyle," said Ron, with a snort. His mum hadn't spoken to his father for a week once when she thought he'd written her a note that said *Bye hag! I'll send someone to kill the kids before bedtime*, when, in fact, he'd written *Love you! I'll be home to kiss the kids before bedtime*.

"And you're right," continued Mr. Doyle, getting excited, "sometimes the people from Muggle Artifacts would raid houses suspected of containing Dark objects much the same as the M.L.E.S. Lines were a little blurred, I'd say..."

A thought was creeping its way into Ron's head, and despite all attempts to suppress it, especially on Hermione's homecoming day, he had a revelation. This *was* work-related, he told himself. Sirius had wanted to try to account for the locations of all known Dark objects and their owners, and who was a more well-known owner of Dark items than the Malfoys?

"Mr. Doyle—I think there might have been several Ministry raids in recent years—probably within the last five or six. Can you add the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts records to my list? I'll look through them next week." And then, before the archivist could waylay him further (it was already almost a quarter past) he made for the door.

Mr. Doyle looked very disappointed, but the moment passed and he smiled. "Of course! I'll just put these with the other items you've got on hold. There are a few catalogs from the turn of the century that might interest you as well, I've put those on your trolley, and we can talk about the other things when you come back. If I think of anything else in the meantime, I'll let you know."

Ron thanked Mr. Doyle, grabbed his own notes, and headed for his office. He really liked the archivist, who had always been helpful, and as he walked down the brightly-decorated Ministry halls, he wondered if Hermione might want to come with him one day and help him do some of the research. Might give her the shock of her life if *he* suggested going to the library.

"Whatever are you doing in our end of the Ministry, Ron Weasley?" said a familiar female voice. Parvati Patil was standing in the doorway of the Foreign Diplomatic Service, stunning in deep purple robes. Ron whipped his head around to look behind him and realized that he'd been so preoccupied in thinking about Hermione that he'd ended up at the opposite end of the Ministry.

"Er, took a wrong turn," said Ron, feeling flustered. "I'd stay and talk, but I've got to drop these off and head home—Hermione's back today."

Parvati laughed and waved him off. "Go on," she said, and Ron caught a glimpse of something sparkling on her wrist. "Don't want you to miss your girlfriend. And when you're done snogging, tell her I said hello."

"Wait a second," said Ron, stepping closer. "Where did you get those ... things on your wrist?"

"Ron," said Parvati, rolling her eyes. "Hermione would never, in a million years, wear these. Best off to get her a book from Flourish and Blotts."

"What? How did you..." but Parvati didn't wait to hear him out, she just laughed again and retreated into her office, muttering something about "boys" and "clueless" under her breath.

"URGH." Ron stamped his foot in frustration and headed back the way he'd come. He had less than an hour to get back to his office and get home to Hermione. Now he began to worry that his gift just wasn't... right. Mr. Gladrags had been so excited at the Chudley Cannons victory, that he'd immediately arranged an appointment with Ron to put together a set of robes for Hermione. They were lovely, as far as Ron could tell—at least, they'd seemed to fit the model in the Gladrags shop. Gladrags had thrown in a scarf and some bracelets, but seeing several pieces of similar jewelry on Parvati made Ron wonder if he'd made the right choice.

He checked his watch. Maybe he still had time to stop by The Write Answer. He'd spent one lunch break looking at overpriced quills and fancy ink there, but couldn't make up his mind on a color, and finally remembered that Hermione had scoffed at the brightly-colored green and red inks when they'd shopped in there second year. Or maybe he should just go to Flourish and Blotts. He *knew*, after all, that Hermione would always welcome a new book, and...

"Get off of me! Get off!" A familiar voice carried from the hallway he had just walked past, and Ron skidded to a halt. Checking his watch again, he cursed, and turned around to investigate the matter.

* * * * *

"Hurry up! She's going to be here any minute!" Ginny shook her wand at Remus, who was meticulously, and maddeningly slowly, magicking fir branches to hang above the doorway of the sunroom.

"Patience," he said as he levitated and charmed another branch into perfect position. "Or perhaps you'd like to *help* me."

Ginny pulled a face, and Remus pulled a face in return, which sent her into a fit of giggles. It wasn't like him to be blatantly silly, but the chill in the air seemed to have affected everyone for good. This was nearly as nice as being at Hogwarts for the Christmas holiday, Ginny thought, and she had tried to explain as much to her mother, whose last owl had been plaintive and morose. *"You haven't been home to see me in months, dear. I can only assume that you're having a wonderful time, but it would be nice to see my only daughter every once in awhile. Please do try to carve five minutes out of your busy schedule to send an owl home."* Ginny had sent an owl right away, explaining as patiently as she could that she *would* be home for Christmas, and that she wouldn't have been coming home for the holiday if she were away at school, so why should she have to come home early now? She didn't want to be at home. She didn't tell her mother that, of course, because her mother owned a disappointed sigh more lethal than most hexes, but it was true. She wanted to be here, where she could study with a teacher who was also a friend. She wanted to live nearly on her own, just up the road from her brother—and from Harry, whose owls were more than daily now; he'd taken to writing them on dragon back, and she'd kept every one. She wanted to be here when Hermione walked in.

It was only the Winter Solstice, but it felt more like Christmas Eve than any Christmas Eve in recent years. Ginny felt just as she had used to when she was little, and the promise of Bill or Charlie was on the horizon. It was always so exciting when an older brother came back from abroad all laden with exotic things, looking like a stranger. And Hermione... well, she was almost an older sister. Ginny smiled to herself. She would *be* a sister, one day.

Especially if Ron had anything to say about it. He had spent the last two days going fitfully from place to place, unable to concentrate unless shouted at, taking Hermione's final letter from his pocket and looking at it with a hungry expression. *"She says she thinks she'll get to Lupin Lodge by the end of the day. What does she mean by 'the day', though—the workday? Is that five, or six? It depends on the job, doesn't it? Or does she mean even later—she's been abroad, who knows what they do over there? Or does she mean the actual day, at sunset or something? When should I be home to meet her? She's a bloody unspecific tease, I swear—"*

It surprised Ginny that Ron wasn't home yet. She glanced at the clock. It was nearly five, and he had been in such a state this morning that Sirius had told him not to go to work. But Ron had insisted that if Sirius didn't give him a stack of hideous research to pore over he'd go mad with anticipation, and so the two of them had gone to Diagon Alley, leaving the other three to do the decorating.

The other *three*. Harry was in the house, for the first time in months, and Ginny was so aware of it that her skin hadn't stopped tingling all afternoon. He had done an insane double shift at Azkaban, and had arrived at Lupin Lodge at lunchtime with a look on his face that Ginny knew very well: he wasn't going anywhere without a fight. She'd known he would come. She had written to him yesterday, promised that she was ready to be near him without getting ill, and that was all it had taken to bring him to the door. Remus had explained to Harry that he was not allowed inside, but Harry hadn't budged. *"I'm staying,"* he'd said, his eyes on Ginny. *"I'm really in the mood to decorate."*

Ginny checked over her shoulder now and caught his eye again. He was just beyond the door, standing in the corridor with a basket of holly in his hands, watching her, and the way he was watching her made her heart fly into her throat. But Remus's rule for the afternoon had been that if the two of them were suddenly so hell bent on helping him decorate, they'd have to stay in separate rooms or face the consequences. *"Oh no,"* Harry had said. *"Detention in the Forbidden Forest?"* But they had obeyed. They knew what the consequences were.

Although... Ginny thought, *if the benefits outweigh the consequences...*

"All right, Ginny?" Harry's cheeks were ruddy and the toes of his boots were shiny wet. He must have gone outside for the holly; the first snow had fallen the night before, and it had stuck beautifully.

"All right, Harry."

The warmth of Lupin Lodge was causing his glasses to fog up. He set down the basket, removed the glasses and wiped the lenses on his shirt. Ginny caught her breath. Harry had looked so tired all afternoon—his time at Azkaban was taking a physical toll and Ginny had noticed the lines around his eyes and the thin strands of white hair that were almost, but not quite, buried in among the

black. The job was aging him. But without his glasses he looked vulnerable and young, and Ginny turned away before her will started to fail.

"Ron's not here yet," Harry noted, and whistled under his breath. "He'd better hope he's on time."

"I know!" said Ginny, looking back at him. His glasses were in place but it hardly helped; he had leaned against the wall and fixed his eyes on her again. She found she couldn't look away this time, consequences or not.

Just then, there was a soft *pop!* from the front room, and the clatter of things being dropped to the floor. But it wasn't Hermione—the change in the air was too familiar for that.

Remus seemed to sense the same thing. "Sirius," he called out from his spot near the ceiling, "Could you bring me the wreath greens, they're right—"

There was the sound of something smacking against a wall, and then it came into view. Ginny shrieked and pointed past Harry, who whirled around just in time to see, and duck, a huge amount of flying foliage. The wreath greens shot into the room at high speed, hitting Remus in the stomach.

"Oof!" Remus stumbled from his invisible perch in the air and barely landed on his feet, fists clenched, eyes afire.

From the end of the corridor there erupted a spasm of laughter. "Sorry!" Sirius called cheerfully.

But Remus was brushing pine needles from his robes and heading for the door. "RUN, if you know what's good for you—" He sprinted past Harry and disappeared into the front room. There was a crash, followed by a string of shouted hexes through which Sirius continued to laugh as merrily as if he were being tickled.

"Is that normal?" Harry asked, squinting down the hall.

"Sort of." Ginny got to her feet. Reason told her to stay where she was, pull her wand and clean up the scattered firs on the carpet. She followed a deeper impulse. With her eyes on the back of Harry's neck, she stepped over the mess and crossed the threshold that separated her from him.

"Hi."

He jumped slightly and turned, and the ruddy patches on his cheeks got brighter. "Hi."

It was closer than they'd been in several weeks, and Ginny's heart began to thump. Even beneath the Cannons stadium in the mediwizarding wing, when she had ached to put her hands on him—help him—she hadn't done it. She took a step closer, and lifted her hand to touch him now. "How are you?"

Harry didn't answer. He looked torn; when she grazed her fingertips across the top of his healed shoulder and down his arm he shook his head, but didn't stop her.

"It's all right," she said quietly, bringing her hand to his and taking it. "I'm all right. I promise." She could hear his breath coming faster; she took another small step and felt his chest rise and fall against her own, felt his heart hammer like hers did. She waited for the cold to envelop her, for her sensitivity to make the next step impossible, but the air stayed still and warm. Her head didn't ache and her stomach didn't lurch.

The rest of her body was pounding.

"If Remus—" Harry began, his voice dry.

"I don't care." She could still hear Remus lecturing Sirius on the importance of manners, and she could hear a muffled struggle in reply that meant Sirius was probably body bound and itching to retaliate; they'd be occupied for half an hour. Or at least five minutes. That was all she needed.

Harry pushed his fingers between hers and grasped her hand. His eyes darkened as they focused on her mouth. "Are you sure—"

"Yes—" She knew she was being forward, but it had been too long. Letters were wonderful, but she craved *him*. She pushed closer to him, reached behind his head and pulled his face to hers. Harry made a noise of surprise; he stumbled forward and Ginny fell back against the wall, loving the crush of his weight against her. He braced himself and laughed so close to her mouth that she felt the soft explosion of air on her lips.

"Sorry." He put his forehead to hers and leaned.

She shut her eyes and grinned. "My fault," she murmured, sliding her fingers into the unruly hair at the nape of his neck. An audible breath escaped him and his hand clenched hers.

This time, she didn't have to pull him to her. He bent his head and searched out her mouth; she felt his free hand brush her waist and shivered when he trailed his fingers up her side and down again.

"Oh, Harry..." She hadn't meant to say it quite like *that*. She blushed at herself, but apparently he didn't mind; he kissed her with sudden, painful intensity and Ginny slumped against the wall, giving in. This was what she wanted, had always wanted, from Harry. To be claimed. It only made

sense. She brought her fingers to his temple and dragged them down his jaw, feeling it move. He was tired. Exhausted. She could feel that now. He was also exhilarated and, to her relief, the two emotions seemed to be keeping their balance—she was unreasonably cold, felt herself growing weak, but there was also a soaring sense of joy—

A strange *pop!* in Ginny's mind made her freeze.

"What is it?" Harry muttered, pulling back. "Are you all right?"

"I don't know." Ginny waited, searching herself for the truth. She had promised Harry in more than one letter that she would never again hide pain from him, where Healing was concerned, and it was a promise she intended to keep.

"Do you hurt?" He touched the side of her face, looking guilty.

"Not really, but—"

Thud! Something had fallen to the floor and the air... Ginny concentrated. The currents in the air were all different. She felt the house grow warmer and cooler all at once with new excitement, new happiness—with a strange new serenity.

Someone was laughing in the sunroom.

Someone was standing in the *doorway* of the sunroom. Ginny gasped as her peripheral vision grew embarrassingly clear.

"Hermione—" Harry exclaimed. He dropped his hand, straightened up, shot a flustered glance to his left, and pushed up his glasses. "She's, er—back—"

"Hermione!" Ginny extricated herself from her spot between Harry and the wall, her face so hot she feared it would burn right off. She couldn't even look into the sunroom and it appeared that Harry couldn't either; he was gazing at her in a kind of fixed horror.

"Hi! Oh, I'm so glad to see—well—" Hermione burst out laughing again and, after exchanging a rather painful look, Ginny and Harry finally turned their heads. What Ginny saw made her forget her embarrassment and she could tell by the drop of Harry's jaw that he had forgotten too.

Hermione looked wonderful. She was slim and tan and her hair was much lighter—she wasn't exactly dressed for the current winter weather; a loose, white, sleeveless garment skimmed her figure and she giggled through her fingers, brown eyes bright over the tops of her hands.

"Look at you," Ginny gasped, and went towards her friend. "You look... fantastic."

"Oh stop."

"No, I mean—" Ginny groped for the right words. "Wow. Ron'll have a heart attack."

Hermione's hands came down and her eyes darted over Ginny's shoulder as if she was looking for something, but she didn't dwell on it for long. She grinned and opened her arms, and Ginny hurried to hug her.

Harry hung back until they were done, and Hermione fixed shining eyes on him. Suddenly she looked the way Ginny remembered her in Diagon Alley, after long summers. She shivered with excitement, and looked like she might come right out of her skin.

"Hullo, Harry," she said. "Look at *you!* I really missed you—oh, it's good to see you—it's been—it's never been this long! You look taller. And that Cannons match! Oh my goodness, Ron sent me the Omnioculars and I watched the whole thing three times—you're just *brilliant* and—is that *white* in your—oh, Harry, what am I talking about, quick give me a hug—"

He hugged Hermione for a long time. "It's good to have you back," he muttered eventually, and kissed her cheek before letting her go.

Hermione stared at him in obvious surprise and pleasure. Her eyes darted to Ginny, then back to Harry again, and she pressed her mouth shut on what Ginny could have sworn was a giggle. "*That's* new," was all she said.

"Shut up," said Harry. But he was grinning. He ducked his head and stepped back beside Ginny. "How was traveling?"

"Tiring!" Hermione flopped into the big wicker chair and smiled up at them. "I had to use a fixed Portkey in order to get off the island, and then the nearest international Apparition checkpoint was about a two mile walk *uphill*, or so it seemed at the time. I had to jump through three stations in order to get to the one at Diagon Alley. And of course, you have to rest when you're Apparating that often, or else you can make mistakes, so I sat in France for two hours before coming to London. It was the *worst* wait." Tired as she might have been, her words tumbled over each other in a rush, and she glanced past them again. "Where is, er—where are Sirius and Remus?"

Ginny and Harry shared a quick look. "They're here," Ginny said, and called out for them. The two men hurried down the hall, Remus in the lead, fine brown hair falling in his eyes. Sirius right behind him, his face and arms covered with what looked like a mild rash.

"Hermione!" Sirius knocked Remus out of the way, pulled Hermione out of her chair, and grabbed

her up in a hug. "Lovely to see you, my dear." He stepped back and Hermione peered up at him.

"Are you ill?" she said anxiously.

"Ah, no. Pay no attention to the itching hex, or to these." Sirius held up his hands, which were swollen to twice their normal size. The knuckles had disappeared and it looked like he had balloons on the ends of his arms.

"What *happened*?" she gasped.

"He brought it on himself," Remus muttered, but he gave Hermione an easygoing smile and pushed his hair out of his face. He would have looked almost collected, had it not been for the redness in his cheeks, and Ginny could feel that he was still on the ready for a counterattack. He put out his hand and Hermione took it. "You look happy," he observed. "Glad to be home?"

"Oh yes." Hermione looked around the room at all of them, her face alight. "I can't believe I'm here—oh! Hello!" She crouched down and held out her arms towards a fat, orange creature that had crept up behind all of them. Crookshanks launched himself at Hermione with a pitiful mewling noise that made everyone laugh. "Baby," Hermione said tenderly, and tickled the cat's ears. "I missed you, yes I did." Crookshanks gave a long, deep purr. Hermione stood up with the massive cat clutched to her chest and sent another telltale glance past Ginny and Harry. "I don't suppose there's tea?" she asked. "I'm starving."

Sirius waved his wand and a tray materialized in the air between them, laden with biscuits, cups, and a steaming teapot. "Tea, madam," he announced formally, a grin pulling at one side of his mouth. "And do have a seat. I've got a message for you."

"Oh?" Hermione asked, too casually. She dropped back into her chair and a flush rose in her cheeks. "What message?"

"An employee of mine—you might remember him—tall, hair like this one here," he tousled Ginny's hair with one of his deformed hands and she squealed in disgust. "I believe he's called Ron?"

Hermione kept her eyes on Crookshanks, who had curled up in her lap, and her color continued to rise. "Oh, *Ron*...yes, it... it does ring a bell."

Harry snickered. "I'll bet it—" he began to tease, then glanced at Ginny, reddened, and shut his mouth. Out of the corner of her eye, Ginny saw that Remus had turned his face to the two of them and was standing with arms crossed and eyes narrowed. She ignored him.

"I understand he's keen to welcome you home," Sirius continued. "Unfortunately, his duties kept him in the office a bit longer than expected, and he asked me to express his deep regrets, should you arrive early, that... let's see, how did he put it? If Hermione gets there before I do, tell her I'm losing my bloody mind trying to get home? I think that was it."

Hermione laughed through her nose. "But he's on his way?" she asked softly, still concentrating on her cat.

"Yes." Sirius dropped his joking tone. "He's on his way. He won't be a minute later than he has to be."

"I know." Hermione was entirely pink now, and her fingers had disappeared nervously into Crookshanks' coat, but the confidence in her voice made Ginny warm all over. Ginny brushed the back of her hand against the back of Harry's, and he drummed his knuckles against hers in return. "Everyone have tea with me?" Hermione asked. She looked up and her eyes traveled over their faces. "There's so much I want to ask about."

Ginny sat beside Harry on the sofa, hoping that Remus wouldn't say anything about their proximity. He made a noise of disapproval but left it at that, and after Sirius had cleaned the pine needles out of the carpet, the five of them took tea and started talking.

"What did it look like?" "Have you got pictures of Delia?" "Does this mean you're licensed, or is there some sort of exam you have to take?" "Missed pumpkin pasties and butterbeer, didn't you?" "Honestly, you know Mum's going to feed you up the minute she sees you, you've got so thin." "Do you plan to go back?" "Will you apply to the Ministry now?"

Hermione laughed and answered everything, asking them questions in return. She focused longest on Harry, pinpointing him with a thousand questions about the dragons and dragging information from him on everything: the build of his uniform, Norbert's health, Charlie's management techniques, Viktor's new family, Dementors, chocolate, Azkaban and Draco Malfoy. "I have *several* things to say about those schedules, Harry," she finally said. "You know they're ridiculous and it's simply unethical to have you working those sorts of hours. They have to hire more riders, that's that, and if you won't do something about it then I *will*."

Harry rolled his eyes, but Ginny felt him relax more completely than he had in a long time. He felt very whole, beside her. "Charlie's been interviewing people," he said. "Ever since that article about Viktor, we've had people applying like mad for the dragon jobs."

"And ever since Eloise's article about *you*," Ginny added, knowing that Harry wouldn't.

He nudged her. "Anyway, most of the applicants are just insane. Only a few have even made it to the interviewing stage. I doubt any of them will actually get hired."

"Well they'd just *better*," Hermione said darkly.

Sirius shook his head, looking amazed. "Hermione, I haven't heard that much from Harry in four months put together," he said with a laugh. "Thanks."

"Yeah, thanks," Harry said dryly, but Ginny could tell he was happy. She crept her hand beneath his on the cushion, just behind their touching knees where no one could see, and he curled his fingers around hers.

Hermione's eyes drifted to where their wrists disappeared. She looked right at Ginny and when she smiled, her eyes crinkled at the corners. Ginny grinned back, thrilled to her toes. She hadn't said much about Harry in her letters to Cortona. Words had never been her strong point, and every time she'd tried to explain how she felt, it had come out sounding so much *less* than it was. Still, it had been so hard not to have a girlfriend to share this with. Hermione knew what it was like to fall in love and have it happen back. All the understanding in the world was in her friend's quiet smile, and Ginny found, to her surprise, that she wanted Harry to go home—not for long, of course, but she needed to *talk* with Hermione. Alone. Tell her everything ten times over and hear what she had to say in return.

As if she had spoken her wishes aloud, Remus stood up. "I have a few... chores to do," he said. "If you'll excuse me, Hermione—I'll take your bag up for you, if you like." He picked it up off the floor when Hermione didn't protest, and hefted it under his arm. "Glad you're home safely."

"Thank you, Remus."

"Yes, a pleasure catching up with you, Miss Granger," said Sirius, springing to his feet and shooting a deadly look at Remus's retreating back. He rested one still-swollen hand on his wand, and extended the other to Hermione. She wrinkled her nose at it and gave it a very quick pat.

"All right, Sirius."

"If my young employee is much later, you have my permission to flog him."

Hermione giggled. "I might."

Sirius took a step toward the door, stopped short, and looked over his shoulder at Harry. "Still thinking?" he asked abruptly. "Because like I said, I'll be happy to name the terms of the first round if—"

But Harry shook his head. "I have ideas," he said mysteriously. Ginny gave him a questioning look, but he wouldn't meet her eyes.

"All right then. You three have fun catching up." Sirius grinned around the room, and dashed away down the hall.

"What's wrong with them?" Hermione demanded. "Itching hexes and engorgement?"

Ginny and Harry rushed to explain, and soon the three of them were lost in laughter. They tried to fill her in on four months' worth of events in half an hour's time, trading off as new stories came into their minds, their tales uncensored now that Remus and Sirius had disappeared.

When there was no tea left in the pot and all but one pumpkin pasty (saved for Ron) had disappeared, Harry rubbed his thumb over Ginny's fingers and yawned. "I know you just got here, Hermione, but I'm falling asleep. No offense."

"I'm not offended—or surprised," Hermione said archly. "Those schedules, Harry, I mean it—"

"Okay, okay." Harry laughed. "You don't waste time, do you?"

"No." Hermione pursed her lips, but her eyes were soft and smiling. "Go home. I'll talk to you tomorrow." She got up when Harry did, and hugged him again. "I missed you so much."

"You too." He patted her back and left the room, but not before glancing in Ginny's direction.

Ginny gave Hermione a meaningful look, which Hermione returned, and followed Harry to the front door. The house was dark now, except for the glow of the Christmas lights from the tree in the front room, and the light from the sunroom at the end of the corridor. Harry mostly stood in shadow; the waning moon cut through the patterned window at the top of the door, illuminating a streak of his hair and the rims of his glasses.

"You're not Apparating?" she asked, resting her hands on his chest and smoothing the wool of his jumper just for an excuse to touch him.

"I am." Harry hesitated. "But I wanted to say goodnight—if you're still feeling well."

"Yes," Ginny whispered, and turned up her face.

Harry looked quietly at her for a long time before he kissed her. This time his mouth was gentle, his tongue slow and deep; his hands touched her hips, then slid around to her lower back and pulled her as close to him as she would fit. Ginny grabbed his shoulders and held on, so dizzy with pleasure that she hardly remembered to kiss him in return. She opened her mouth and let her

head fall back, wondering why it only felt amazing. She couldn't have got this good at controlling herself in so short a time—could she? Even Namita Vibushan had said, in her book, that it had been a year before she had allowed her lover to come to her without fear of pain.

Harry broke away, breathing hard. "How is this all right?" he asked anxiously, as if Vibushan's words had stuck with him, too. He still hadn't returned that book. "Are you really all right? What's this mean, from now on?"

Ginny opened her eyes. He looked dazed, worried—hopeful. "I don't know," she said slowly. "I *have* been practicing, but I don't... You're so happy tonight that perhaps..." She stopped, not sure how to put it. Even the prospect of Dementors in the morning didn't seem to have an effect on Harry at the moment. "I think Hermione has a lot to do with it."

He was quiet for a long time. "It was weird without her," he finally said. "She's the closest thing I have to a sister." He said it awkwardly, but Ginny knew it was the truth. She wished Hermione could have heard him say it.

"Well sisterly advice is the best kind, you know." Ginny brushed the hair away from his forehead and pushed his glasses back up to the bridge of his nose. "Believe me, I give it all the time."

Harry gave a soft snort of laughter and shut his eyes, seeming to like having his glasses adjusted for him.

"You *should* go to sleep. I'll keep Hermione busy till Ron gets here, and I'll see you tomorrow if you're not too tired. And we can see if this is really all right. I'll talk to Remus."

Harry opened his eyes. "Are you going to tell Hermione about-us?" He sounded strained.

Ginny shrugged. "She already knows."

"I know, but..." He glanced down the hall. "She'll ask questions."

"If I answer her, do you mind?"

"No." Harry went quiet. His hands were still on her back and he drummed his fingers as he studied her eyes. He looked into them as if he were trying to read something that was written there in tiny print, and Ginny had the sudden, distinct impression that he was going to ask her a question himself. He seemed to be struggling against something, and for the first time since Hermione had come home, Ginny felt her head pound. She winced. Something was badly troubling him.

"What is it, Harry?"

"It's nothing, I was only..." He shifted his eyes away and let her go. "It's nothing. I don't want to—never mind."

"No, tell me, what?"

"I'm just tired." He looked away and Ginny knew there was more to it than that. Before she could press him, Harry leaned in and gave her a quick, soft kiss on the corner of her mouth. "But I'm glad we..." he began, and stopped. Ginny could feel the heat from his face. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yes." She touched his shoulder. "Your arm still feels all right?"

"It hasn't bothered me at all."

"Good. Be careful at work." She returned his chaste kiss. "Goodnight." And before she had to watch him Disapparate, which she hated, she turned and went back down the corridor.

* * * * *

"So, what'd you end up spending the Knut on?" asked Ron, trying to make conversation with the boy sitting across from him. Several rolls of parchment were stacked between them, and Ron was currently filling out yet another M.L.E.S. form.

The boy, who had told them his name was "Max" while refusing to divulge any other information, sniffed, and answered, "A Knut doesn't go far these days." He wiped his nose with the sleeve of his dirty robe, which had grown filthier since the last time Ron had seen him, hovering next to the Ministry steps. So had his hair and skin; still, Ron had recognized him at once.

Amos Diggory walked into the office, a wide smile making the hairs on his beard stand out.

"Well, which one is it?" Diggory asked, turning to Max. "I've just spoken with Headmistress McGonagall. Are you Max Franklin, Max Jarvis, or David Mackston? All three were at Hogwarts recently, and we're checking now to see if any of them can be located."

"I can't remember," said the boy, flipping some hair out of his eyes. "Max Franklin was in Slytherin, and really, really smart. Max Jarvis was in Ravenclaw and all the girls liked him. David Mackston was in Hufflepuff. Which one do you think I am?"

"I think you're the obnoxious one," said Ron, waving the last parchment in the air so that it would dry more quickly. "As a matter of fact, is it all right with you, Mr. Diggory, if I just put his last name down as 'Prat' on this paperwork? That's the most accurate description."

Max glared. "Are you really going to send me home with *him*? I think I'm better off on the streets,

quite honestly," he said. Ron was once again reminded of Draco Malfoy by the haughty tone in the boy's voice.

Mr. Diggory laughed. "You don't know what you're saying, boy." He patted Max on the head while Max cringed away as much as his bindings would let him. "Molly Weasley is the best cook I know of—even her toast is first class. That's got to be better than the snakes and snails you've been living off of in Knockturn Alley."

"In a cellar," said Ron, standing up and cracking his knuckles. He'd never, ever seen such a pile of paperwork before. After following Mr. Diggory down the corridor to the M.L.E.S. office, and waiting for him to deposit a kicking-and-screaming Max into a secure chair, Ron had stepped in, and tried to find out what had happened.

This time, Max had been caught trying to steal a wand from a wizard shopping for winter cloaks in Diagon Alley. Mr. Diggory had happened by, and, recognizing Max as part of a gang of several children who usually kept to Knockturn Alley, had pulled him in. The M.L.E.S. were reluctant to send Max back to the Children's Home since he always managed to escape, and Ron had, without thinking, offered to take Max to the Burrow. He'd run down the hall to tell Sirius to go ahead without him, and hurried back to the M.L.E.S. office, hoping to collect Max and drop him off before five. It was after seven, and Hermione was surely at Lupin Lodge by now, and Ron was beginning to have second thoughts about the whole situation.

"Thanks a *lot*," hissed Max.

Ron shrugged. "You still owe me for running off that time," he said. "Now we're even." He turned to Mr. Diggory. "Er, how am I supposed to get him home? Can I use a Full Body Bind? Or the Leg Locker Curse?"

"Oh no, no, no, no!" Mr. Diggory looked shocked. "We can't use those on children. There're *rules*."

"Yeah," snorted Max. "There're *rules*."

"Children, right," said Ron, getting irritated. "What about monsters?"

"We've got a fireplace hooked up in the back, here. We can keep him tied up. Got to stop and take a picture real quick though. I'll send it off to McGonagall to see if any of the Hogwarts staff can identify him. It might be difficult though. They grow so much at this age..." Mr. Diggory trailed off, and Ron wondered if he was thinking of his own son, Cedric. "Anyway," he smiled and continued, "it's good of you to take him, Ron. Your mum will know of some ways to keep him around the Burrow. Tell her that one of our representatives will be out to check on things tomorrow morning."

Mr. Diggory untied Max from the chair. Max tried to lean forward and bite Mr. Diggory's arm as they walked down the hall. Ron rolled his eyes. "You're twelve," he said. "I stopped trying to bite people when I was three."

When they reached the fireplace, Ron stopped, feeling panicked. "How're we going to get him to pick the right fireplace?" he asked, jerking his head towards Max.

"Ah, right." Mr. Diggory looked uncomfortable. "Well, we either have to put him in something, or you have to carry him."

"That's abusive, that is!" said Max, getting ready to kick Mr. Diggory. Ron held out his wand and made the cords extend to Max's ankles. He might as well have been in a Full Body Bind. He couldn't walk anywhere, that was for sure.

Feeling somewhat evil, Ron grinned and held out his arms. "Come on then." Mr. Diggory picked up Max and set him to rest in front of Ron. Ron reached for his briefcase, then scooped his arms under Max's and waited for Mr. Diggory to throw the Floo powder into the fire.

"The Burrow," said Ron, as he stepped into the fireplace.

He'd never known anyone to move so much during a Floo trip. Although he'd traveled that way enough in his life for it to feel normal, Ron still liked to stay as still as possible as he sped through the chimneys and past the other fireplaces. Max was struggling, and Ron was afraid more than once that he'd accidentally drop him off at a random location, but he managed to hold on 'til the end, and within seconds, they'd tumbled out of the spacious fireplace at the Burrow.

"Arthur! Is that..." Molly Weasley's voice trailed off as she walked into her kitchen to see her son, a strange child, and an enormous amount of soot on the floor.

"Hi, Mum!" he said brightly, pulling himself and Max off the floor, and sitting Max on one of the benches around the big table. "This is Max."

"Hello, Max," said Mrs. Weasley as though she were talking to any other friend he might have brought home. "I'm very pleased to meet you."

"Sod off," said Max.

Ron felt his ears start to burn. He'd dared to swear once in front of his mother. The punishment

had been enough for him to still feel pain when others did so. But to his surprise, his mother just smiled as though he'd told her he was doing very well, thank you.

"Ron," she said sweetly. "Why don't we show your friend the garage? There are lots of lovely things to look at in there, and he can occupy himself while I finish making the tea."

Tucking Max, who could have used about a month's worth of cauldron cakes, under an arm, Ron followed his mother to the garage, thinking that it was an odd place for his mother to want to place a guest of any kind. The garage was still very much Mr. Weasley's hideaway. Devoid of the Ford Anglia for years, the empty space had quickly filled in with an odd assortment of plugs, machinery, and several mysterious large objects covered with blankets. Topping the one window was a multi-colored display of batteries, arranged by size.

"What is this, a Muggle dungeon?" asked Max, taking everything in. "What crazy wizard lives here? You people are crazy. I'm going to complain to the Minister of Magic."

"Untie him, dear," said Mrs. Weasley. When Ron shook his head at her in warning, she just smiled. "It's all right, you can untie him." She turned to Max. "I'll arrange for the Minister himself to pay you a visit very soon, how's that? Tea will be ready in about half an hour." Gently, she guided Ron out of the garage, shot an Unbreakable Charm at one of the larger, shrouded objects, and shut the door on Max.

Once outside, Ron watched as his mother placed a few charms on the garage. "Nothing harmful, dear," she said, as they went back into the house. "All very legal. It will keep him inside." She walked over to the big cauldron and began to stir. "Now, why don't you tell me who he is and what is going on."

In a rush, Ron explained his first meeting with Max, and then how he'd come across Mr. Diggory and Max earlier that afternoon. "So, what else could I do? He'd just end up back in Knockturn Alley, and that can't be good. But I thought I'd just be able to take him, and they made me fill out all this paperwork and—would you keep him?"

His mother jumped. "Keep him?" she echoed. "Ronald Weasley, what *are* you talking about? Do you mean for the evening, or—"

"I don't know, I-I thought you might want him," Ron said, but as his mother's expression grew more and more shocked, he began to think that bringing Max here might have been a really stupid idea.

"Might want him," she said flatly. "To live here?" Her eyes narrowed and she gave him a truly scary look. "For how long, exactly, did you consider this before you decided to do it?"

Ron gulped and took a step back. That was the voice she used on his dad when there was a serious problem. "Er... not that long?"

"I see." His mother pressed her lips together and turned to her cauldron. "But I suppose," she continued scathingly, "since you know how simple it is to raise a child, it's perfectly well for you to drop one in our laps."

"I—Mum, I wasn't trying to—I just thought—"

"That's exactly what you didn't do!" cried his mother, slapping her spoon on the rim of the cauldron and making stew fly everywhere. "Think!"

Ron backed out of the kitchen to take a quick look at the clock. Damn. Hermione must be ready to kill him by now, and his mother wasn't going to do anything about Max—now he was going to have to take the kid back up to Diagon Alley and spend another two hours trying to put him *back*—

"Mum please," he begged. "Let me come back tomorrow and take care of this—just take Max for the night, *please*, and I'll deal with it later, but Hermione's home today, she's been home for two or three hours by now, and I'm *late*." He stood there practically panting, his heart racing. *Please let her say yes, please let her say yes...*

His mother stopped stirring. She turned away from the cauldron and stared at him. "Hermione came home today?" she repeated blankly. "She's there now?"

Ron felt a warm, nervous clutch at his heart. It was the sort of feeling he hadn't had about Hermione since fifth year—he felt insecure and violently hormonal. She was *there*. He was about to see her. *Touch* her. Hear her voice.

"She should have been there around five," he answered, hardly noticing his mother's eyes widen, "So if you could just hold onto Max—at least for tonight, we can sort it out tomorrow—I want to get home."

His mother made a muffled noise that Ron could not interpret—it might have been indignation.

He threw up his hands. "Look, I'm sorry to just throw him at you without any warning, but *please*, Mum—"

"Of course I'll look after him!" Now she sounded indignant. Her eyes narrowed and she waved her

long-handled spoon like a paddle. "Go home right this instant! I can't believe you've kept Hermione waiting for three hours, she must be exhausted with traveling!"

Ron's stomach churned. "I feel terrible about that," he muttered, "but I couldn't just leave him—" *Bang!* From the garage there had come an explosive noise followed by the sound of raining metal, and Ron winced. "Though perhaps I should've."

To his surprise, his mother gave a short, close-mouthed laugh. "As if a few explosions in there will make any difference," she said tartly, and turned back to her cooking. "Max will be fine here, go on."

A weight lifted from Ron's chest. He could leave. He could see Hermione in seconds. "Thanks, Mum," he said, and raced over to his briefcase full of papers. He grabbed the handle with one hand and smoothed his hair back with the other, then straightened his robes and yanked his wand out of his belt. "Bye."

"Hug Hermione for me," was the last thing Ron heard before he Disappeared.

The downstairs hallway of Lupin Lodge appeared around him. It was dark, but there was light coming from two of the rooms on the corridor. Hermione had to be in one of those rooms. Ron dropped his bag to the floor and heard the papers spill out, but didn't mind them. "Hermione?" he called out, barely managing the word. His throat was closing with anticipation. "Where are you?"

He didn't wait for an answer, but strode to the doorway of the front room and looked to see if—

* * * * *

Hermione was standing in the middle of the sunroom, hands folded in front of her mouth, tapping her foot. The moment she saw Ginny, she unfolded her fingers and held out her arms with a little squealing noise and a huge grin.

Ginny hurried forward and threw her arms around her friend. The two girls embraced for a long time, and Hermione talked breathlessly while they hugged. "I can't believe it!" she whispered. "The way he was looking at you—it's so good to see that! You can't imagine how funny it is to see *Harry* of all people—not that I'm surprised, of course, because if he's managing it with anyone, it ought to be you, but Ginny, he's so different! He's so... mellow. It's wonderful. It's so wonderful. I'm so happy for you."

Ginny clung to Hermione and shut her eyes. She needed to hear these things, and there hadn't been anyone around to say them. No one had talked to her about what was happening—not in the way that counted. Not like this.

"Thank you," she whispered, and by the time she pulled away from Hermione, both of them were sniffing. "We're such idiots," she said, laughing. "We've got nothing to cry about. Come on, let's sit by the Christmas tree—it's nicer in there."

When they were curled up in the front room at either end of the sofa, fairy lights reflecting from their hair and skin, Hermione laced her arms around her knees and asked Ginny to tell her everything.

"Oh there's so much." Ginny imagined Hermione's face when she told her that she was a Healer, and wondered if now was the time. She checked the clock, and was shocked to see that it was nearly seven. "Where's *Ron*?" she said unthinkingly.

Hermione's face clouded for a moment, but then she took a deep breath and the corners of her mouth lifted in a smile. "Whatever he's doing," she said, "it has to get done. Or he'd be here."

Ginny stared. She'd never seen Hermione so calm about something important. This was precisely the sort of behavior from Ron that had used to send her friend flying off the handle. All that Thinking and meditation must have had quite an effect. "I can't imagine anything keeping him from being here," she said. "It must be something huge. He's been totally mental for two weeks, Hermione. Honestly."

Hermione's eyes shone. "Thanks for telling me that. Now tell me about *you*."

Ginny did. She recounted the beginnings, though Hermione already knew them: how Harry had helped with the first Wolfsbane Potion, and how it had led to the evening in Gryffindor Tower, at Lavender's wedding. She slowly described, as well as she could, the nightmare she'd had on the morning that Harry had first gone to work at Azkaban, and the sensation of being kissed in her dream. Hermione shivered, reached out, and squeezed her hand.

"Oh Ginny," she breathed.

Ginny told her about the evening of that same day. She described how she and Harry had just been talking; how there had been no special moment—and how suddenly it had become the only moment.

Hermione nodded. "Isn't it funny? The first time... sneaks up on you."

"What did you feel like?" Ginny asked. "The first time?"

"I felt like..." Hermione bit her lip. She shut her eyes for a second, probably to remember it more clearly, and Ginny felt a rush of lovely, tingling air surround the two of them. "It was like I'd had a question bothering me for a long time and I couldn't work it out," Hermione said slowly. "Kissing Ron was like... a very important answer. I felt-relieved." Hermione opened her eyes and looked around; there was another rush of emotion in the air, but this time it was empty and wanting. She shook her head, and Ginny saw that her eyes were wet. "He needs to get here."

"He'll be home any minute."

"I know. But I've missed him so much that now it just..."

"Hurts." Ginny moved closer to Hermione and hesitated before holding out her hands and passing them through the air. Perhaps she could help.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked, frowning her brow.

"Something I'm learning in class," Ginny murmured. "Let me try it, and then I'll-I'll tell you what it is." She suppressed her own excitement at the prospect, and concentrated on Hermione, whose aura was... reluctant to be studied. It surrounded Hermione in a slender, contained, intensely energetic and pensive ellipse that felt smooth and cool against Ginny's fingertips. So different from Ron's. Shot through like marble with fingers of warmth and calm. Ginny dragged her hands along its impenetrable surface until her fingers fell through it into something soft and black and aching. Like a bruise. It extended like a chasm just over Hermione's chest; Ginny pushed her hands further into it and sucked in a breath as pain hit her like a wall.

This wasn't just missing Ron, although that had magnified it-this was Hermione's grief over her parents. It was hot, dark, terrible-it was guilt and anger and anguish and steely resolve, all spiraling in towards her heart. Ginny yanked her fingers away as if from a fire. She wasn't prepared to deal with that just now, and she wasn't stupid enough to try it. She dropped her hands and opened her eyes, trying to keep herself from shaking.

Hermione was looking at her with wide eyes and a half-open mouth. "You're a *Healer*," she whispered. "Aren't you?"

Ginny jumped. How had Hermione-but then of course, she'd probably read everything there was to read about it, and recognized the techniques.

"Yes," she answered.

Hermione stared a little longer, then brought up the lights in the room with a businesslike flick of her wrist. She knelt up on the sofa and squinted at Ginny. "How did you find out?" she demanded. "When did you know?"

"I found out just after you left," Ginny said, but gave no further explanation of her studies. She knew Hermione didn't need one, and she didn't want to talk about Healing now; instead, the whole story of her strange and limited relationship with Harry came spilling out of her as though someone had pulled the plug from a drain. She told of how she had passed out; she told of their fight, of their understanding now and of their letters. She told her how different Harry had seemed tonight, and how she knew that it was too soon to last. Hermione sat unmoving, listening, her eyes growing wider by the second until Ginny thought they might fall right out of her head.

"We should have *known*," was all Hermione managed, when Ginny ran out of words. "There were-there were *signs*. How could I be so stupid? Ginny-this means-perhaps we..." Hermione's fingers flew to her temples, her brow creased, and she was silent for a long time. A painful hope radiated towards Ginny from the other end of the sofa, but Hermione said nothing more.

Into the silence, the clocked chimed once. Quarter till eight.

A quiet *pop!* sounded in the corridor, followed by the thud of papers on the floor. Hermione's head snapped to the doorway and she was on her feet in a heartbeat, her hands trembling at her sides.

"Hermione?" Ron's voice was thick. "Where are you?"

A ragged half-breath escaped Hermione, but she didn't answer. There were three quick, heavy footsteps, the doorway darkened, and the air was suddenly charged with such intimate emotions that Ginny flinched against them. They weren't hers. She shouldn't be here.

Healing forgotten, she raced upstairs as quietly as she could, leaving Hermione and Ron to their reunion.

* * * * *

She was there. Ron froze in place and his blood crashed through him. He saw Ginny jump to her feet and run away up the stairs, but it hardly mattered; there was no way to keep his jaw from dropping at the sight of the girl by the Christmas tree.

She'd grown up. He hadn't realized it, but the Hermione who lived in his mind had never aged past fifteen, when they had last spent a summer apart. That Hermione had been round-cheeked and wild-haired, small and pale, with alert brown eyes and a mouth that never stopped moving—she'd been so *young*. And this Hermione...

Ron couldn't take his eyes off her face. She was brown and slender, her hair was longer and more golden, and her face was tense with joy; she wasn't smiling but her eyes shone so brightly that she might have had a fever. She was beautiful.

"Ron," she whispered, and took a step away from the sofa.

He hadn't heard Hermione's voice in months, and its vibration seemed to touch him from across the room. "Hermione," he rasped.

She shut her eyes briefly and Ron swept his starved gaze down her body, which was covered in something that barely even qualified as a garment. It touched her everywhere he wanted to touch her, and seemed to be made of something thinner than paper.

When she opened her eyes again, they were bloodshot, and they traveled over him in the same way that he'd just looked at her.

"You look... different," she said shyly, her voice low. "You look *wonderful*."

He couldn't stand still. Half a second later, his face was in her hair. He wasn't sure how he had crossed the room but it didn't matter—she was breathing against him again, these were her hands on his back—she smelled like salt water and travel dust and... Hermione. He got his nose close to her neck and breathed deeply. She was the same. He kissed the side of her throat—her jawline—her chin—working his way towards her lips.

"Oh, Ron—" Her voice was choked and she seemed to be making herself as small as possible, curling up against the front of him as if she'd hide in his robes, nearly making him lose his balance.

It wouldn't do to stand. He bent his knees and cradled her against him, and they fell together onto the sofa. He pulled her onto his lap and slipped his arms beneath hers, rediscovering her back with his hands—tracing shoulder blades and spine and... had she always been so small? She whimpered and lowered her face to his with a soft, urgent little noise that made Ron's temperature shoot into the stratosphere. His whole body stirred in response. She was home—she was on top of him—and he needed to kiss her. Now.

He spread one hand on her lower back and palmed the back of her head with his other hand, sliding his fingers into her hair. He guided her face down to meet his and set his mouth against hers barely, softly, in slow reintroduction. She exhaled into him, and he brushed his lips back and forth on hers for a long, electric second.

It all happened at once: Hermione's mouth fell open with a soft moan and she sealed it across Ron's—she moved against him, pressed herself to him—he clutched her hair in one hand and gathered the fabric of her robe into the other, twisting it into a bunch so that it pulled tight along the front of her. Slowly, he brought his hand out of her hair and dragged it down the side of her neck to rest on the warm skin of her shoulder.

"Hermione..."

She made a pleading noise and pressed towards him again. Keeping her robes tight in one fist, he let his other, open hand run the length of her bare arm. Gooseflesh rose up on her skin and her breath hitched. Ron brought his hand back to her shoulder and gently traced her collarbone to the hollow in the center—what was she *wearing* in the middle of winter—he hoped she'd never wear anything else. He thanked Max for a brief second for making him forget the Gladrags package in his office.

"Not here," she managed, when his hand began its necessary descent along her front. She snatched his fingers in her own and took them from her body—he groaned and ravaged her mouth with his tongue, tasting her for the first time in four months, unable to control the hunger he felt. Her free hand moved from his hair to his face to his chest; he felt her fingers fumble to unclasp his cloak and push it back from his shoulders, and then she pulled her mouth away from his with a gasp leaned back on the pillows, panting.

She was gorgeous. So bloody gorgeous, sitting on his knees with her face flushed and her hair full of sunshine and her skin tan against the white. She was ethereal. He opened his mouth to tell her so, but couldn't.

"Missed me, did you?" His voice was hoarse.

She laughed breathlessly and her eyes filled with tears. "Missed you—oh Ron." She opened her mouth and shut it several times, shook her head, and gave up.

It said enough that she was speechless. He put his hands on her hips and stroked her sides with his thumbs, for once not frightened by her tears. She leaned forward and put her face against his neck and he kept hold of her, breathing the scent of her hair. Being with her was everything— it had

never occurred to him just how much of his life she occupied, not even while she'd been away. But from the moment he'd seen her standing there, he had felt an amazing fullness where the emptiness had just been. It ached.

"You must be so tired," he managed. "I'm sorry I was late."

She sniffled on his collar. "It's all right."

"One of the kids who keeps running away from the Children's Home got caught again, and I-I sort of know him, I didn't want to leave him—so I dropped him off with my mum after work. They made me fill out papers before I could take him. It took an age."

Hermione lifted her head and sat back again. She looked at him silently for a long time. "You're so good," she mumbled finally, and touched his face with shaking fingers until neither of them could bear it and they were kissing again. Ron felt the shape of her as they kissed, touching as much of her as she would let him. He felt as though there was no better way to express his happiness; he never wanted to be farther from Hermione than he was right now.

"Are you exhausted?" he asked, the next time they broke away from each other.

She nodded, but made no move to go to bed.

"Want to stay up for awhile?" he asked hopefully, resting his hands on her thighs.

She chewed her lip, then shook her head. "I need to sleep," she said, and then yawned as if to prove it.

Ron laughed softly and squeezed her leg. She was so cute, and she had no idea. He had missed that so much. "All right," he said, but had no clue how he was going to separate himself from her. After four months, even one night apart seemed cruel.

"I-I really don't want to leave you tonight," Hermione whispered. She sounded awkward, even embarrassed, but Ron's heart leapt. *Yes. Stay with me.* "But you can't stay here."

"Come to the Notch," he begged. "I cleaned my room, there's food, I swear it's livable."

Hermione laughed, and shook her head. "What about Harry?"

"He leaves at some evil hour before dawn, he won't even know you were there."

At this, Hermione seemed to wake up again. She sat up straight and pursed her lips. "*I hate* his work schedule, Ron, you know you really ought to have told your father right away that there was something wrong with doing it like that—I can't believe Charlie actually thinks that sort of thing is decent treatment! Can't you say something to someone, because Harry's got white in his hair, for goodness sake, and that's just not normal! He's looking peaky, and I don't like it, and I'll tell you what I told him—if you don't do something about it then I—"

Ron clapped a hand over her mouth. "Blimey, dear," he said, grinning up at her. "Good to have you back, but would you mind shutting up? I'm trying to sort out where we're going to sleep."

Hermione bit his finger.

"Ow!" Ron yanked his hand away and shook it. "Mental!"

"Serves you right," Hermione said loftily. But she was grinning, and two seconds later, she leaned down and gave him a slow, deliberate kiss that left him paralyzed for nearly a minute. "I really did miss you," she said quietly, when she had finished. "For some odd reason."

Ron seized her around the waist and pressed his face to her bare shoulder. "Come home with me," he muttered, holding onto her for dear life. If he blinked, she would disappear again. "I swear Harry won't notice, and even if he did he wouldn't care. You can Apparate right into my room. I just can't...please..."

"Okay," Hermione said, stroking his hair. "All right. Tell me how to get there and explain where your room is so I don't end up in Harry's."

Ron explained exactly how to get to the Notch. He then drew a shimmering plan of the flat in the air with his wand, and pointed out his bedroom to Hermione, who nodded.

"I'll just get my toothbrush, then. And pyjamas."

Ron frowned and took the shoulder of her Cortona robes between his thumb and index finger. "Can't you just wear this?" he asked, tugging on it. "I like this thing."

Hermione blushed. "I... I'll be right over," she said. She slid off of his lap, and disappeared up the stairs.

Ron stood in the front room for a long time, unable to orient himself. He'd just had Hermione in his arms. He could still feel her. He'd have her in his arms all night. Warm against him. Whole. She'd just been here, with him, in this room—solid and lovely and insane and perfect.

At some point, he collected himself. He picked up his cloak, went into the hallway and gathered up his stack of disorderly papers, and left Lupin Lodge for the Notch. He dropped his things in his bedroom chair, silently thanked Harry for the suggestion that he tidy up his room in case Hermione wanted to see their house, and changed into his own pyjamas, then sat on the edge of his bed and

waited.

He waited longer than he thought he should have had to, and then—

“What in the hell—who’s in here?”

It was Harry’s voice, thick with sleep but alert and afraid. Ron shot to his feet and picked up his wand.

“Her—Hermione?” Harry sounded baffled. “What are you—”

“Oh my goodness—” Hermione squeaked. “I’m sorry, Harry, I didn’t mean to startle you—I’ve been doing this all day over international borders, you’d think I could manage—but—I have the wrong—” She stammered to a stop.

“Er.” Harry was apparently at a loss. “You—you probably want the, er—the next door on the right.”

Ron shut his eyes and willed himself to contain the shriek of hysterical laughter that was fighting to get out of him. He raced to Harry’s room, pulled open the door, grabbed Hermione—who was standing rigid with her arms clamped across her chest—dragged her out, and shut the door. She fled into his bedroom, glowing red right through her tan, and Ron would have followed if he hadn’t heard a muffled sniggering behind Harry’s door.

Ron threw the door open. “Yes?” he demanded, pointing his wand. “Something funny?” He wanted to laugh—he *wanted* to laugh—but Hermione was in the next room.

The lump of bedcovers that was Harry continued to shiver with mirth. He gave a random shout of laughter, and one pale fist came out from beneath the duvet to pound against the mattress.

“Shut up, mate, I mean it,” Ron warned.

The fist disappeared and the lump of bedcovers curled up in the other direction, still shaking. Harry’s cries of glee were almost totally muffled now, and Ron didn’t see the point in standing around any longer. He shut the door and went back to his room.

Hermione sat in the middle of his bed with her arms around her legs, looking perfectly horrified.

“Oh *no*,” she moaned. “I thought I concentrated but I must be so tired that—”

“Shh. Don’t worry,” Ron said quietly, going to her at once and pulling down the covers beside her. “Come on, get in.”

Hermione crawled under the bedclothes, still scarlet, and still talking. “It’s not that he doesn’t know, it’s just—I don’t want him thinking that we—because we’re *not*.”

“No, I know we’re not,” Ron said dryly.

“And now he’ll think—and I don’t want him telling Ginny! Or Sirius, or anyone up at the—not that he would, because he’s—but Ron—”

Ron had crawled in beside her by this time. He spooned against her back and sighed, loving every inch of her and how she filled the hollow curve his body made, and how soft she was under his arm. He tucked it around her and she held onto it.

“I cannot believe I just did that,” she went on despairingly. “He’s going to tease the life out of us.”

“Probably.” Ron shifted closer to her, lulled by the ongoing vibration of her voice, which buzzed in her back and resounded in his chest.

“You don’t sound bothered!”

“I’m not.” He kissed the back of her head. “You know about him and Ginny, right?”

“Well... yes?”

“Throw it back in his face. He never knows what to do. He’ll shut right up.”

Hermione was quiet. She laced her fingers through his. “All right. If he does, then I will.”

Ron grinned. “Good, that’ll be fun.”

“No it *won’t*.” Hermione nudged his shin with her heel. “You’re terrible.”

“Mmm.” He brushed her hair away from her neck and lifted it up, moving it to the pillow above her head. “Hey, you wore the thing,” he said happily, noticing her nightdress for the first time.

“It is a *chemise*, Ron, not a thing, and it’s not the same as what I was wearing before. Honestly. This one is for sleeping.”

Ron kissed her neck. “Fine,” he conceded. “Just wear it a lot.”

She craned her neck to glare back at him, but Ron propped himself up on his elbow and dropped a kiss on her mouth before she could think up any scathing reply.

She sighed and snuggled back into him, holding his hand with both of hers. “Goodnight, Ron,” she said softly.

“Goodnight, Hermione.”

She went quiet immediately after that; she must have been dead tired, Ron reflected. He kept his arm around her and studied every bit of her that he could see. There was her dark shoulder,

and here was the mass of her hair, coiling all over the place and touched with blonde. There were her hands on his. Here was the slope of her side and the rise of her hip. Here she was, breathing and falling asleep right where she ought to be.

Ron put out the lights and held fast to Hermione, not quite convinced she wasn't still a dream.

— CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE —

Christmas at the Burrow

The smell of cinnamon and cloves and baking greeted Hermione as she stepped out of the fireplace in the Burrow. Quickly, she turned and dragged her old Hogwarts trunk out of the way, just in time to avoid Ron, who came barreling through with his own trunk, Pig's cage, and several other packages in his arms.

Before Hermione could dust the soot from her robes, Mrs. Weasley had enveloped her in a tight hug, which did much to lighten the heaviness that still lingered from her morning visit to St. Mungo's. Delia had warned Hermione that in the beginning she might feel frustrated and uninspired around her parents, but to be patient and try to let the answers appear. Part of the key to Thinking was *not* to think, and so Hermione laughed and returned Mrs. Weasley's warm embrace.

"You're a sight for sore eyes," said Mrs. Weasley, stepping back to look admiringly at her. "And so healthy and brown-looking! A bit thin though, didn't they feed you out there? Well, never mind, come in, come in, and have a pumpkin pasty—I've just made them."

"What about me?" asked Ron, feigning a wounded look. He held out his arms to his mother. She swatted her dishtowel at him.

"You can get these trunks out of the kitchen. There's barely enough room in here and—"

"Ron!" A small boy of about twelve, with sandy hair and a wide mouth, had interrupted Mrs. Weasley. He started to run towards Ron, and then, as if suddenly remembering his age, slowed, and said much more casually, "Did you bring me anything?"

"Maybe I did, maybe I didn't," said Ron, winking at Hermione. "If you help me move these trunks into the other room, you might find out. But first, Max, this is Hermione."

Max turned to Hermione and looked at her with narrowed eyes. He turned back to Ron. "Your girlfriend?" he asked. "She's all right. Not as pretty as my friend Ella."

"Well that's quite a compliment," said Hermione, holding out her hand and resisting a desire to laugh. "Thank you."

Max looked astounded that she had taken the information without offense. He reached out and shook her offered hand. "You're okay," he admitted, and then grabbed onto the handle of one of the trunks and started heaving it towards the other room. Ron quickly muttered a Levitation Charm and the trunk lifted off the ground, although Max continued to exert effort, as if struggling under the weight.

"Do you need any help?" Hermione asked Mrs. Weasley.

"Oh, no, dear, I'm almost done," she answered. "Besides, Ginny has been in here all morning and we've made quite good progress. Why don't you go in the other room and see everyone? I'm sure you want to see the baby—just take this tray in for me, will you?" Mrs. Weasley shoved a tray of mince pies into Hermione's hands, and ushered her into the other room.

Hermione had spent many Christmases at Hogwarts and, although the decorations there had been splendid, they had not been concentrated into one small room as they were at the Burrow. An enormous tree stood in a corner of the room. The ceiling had been magically lifted to accommodate it and sloped at a very strange angle. Bill and Charlie stood around the tree helping Ron and Max empty the trunks of gifts, and Mr. Weasley sat in a very big chair in the corner opposite the tree, swirling a short glass of firewhiskey in his hand and talking animatedly to Sirius and Remus. It took Hermione's eyes a moment to adjust to the brilliant, warm glow of the room and, when she turned to her right, she saw Penelope sitting in a rocking chair, cradling a small, redheaded bundle. To Hermione's surprise, Cho Chang, with hair much shorter than Hermione remembered, was crouched on the floor next to them, tickling the baby's tiny toes. Cho looked up and waved Hermione over, and Hermione remembered Harry telling her that Cho was one of the dragon riders at Azkaban.

"Hello!" said Hermione, putting down the tray of pies. She gave Penelope a warm hug, nodded to Cho, and knelt on the other side of the rocking chair to get a real look at Leo. "Oh, Penny," she breathed, amazed. "He's beautiful."

Penelope blushed in appreciation and muttered, "Thanks. Would you like to hold him?"

"Can I? I mean, are you sure? I don't know, he looks very comfortable with you—" But a moment later, Penelope had changed places with Hermione, and placed Leo in her arms. Hermione bent her face and softly kissed the baby. He was warm and sweet. "Oh, he smells lovely," she cooed, making a face at him. Leo responded with a short, toothless laugh and Hermione looked up, delighted, to find that Ron stood motionless by the tree, a small gift dangling in his hand, watching her. He looked away at once, and her heart thudded.

"He likes you," said Penelope, gently tickling Leo's tummy. "He's bored with us. We've been reminiscing about Ravenclaw and wondering if my genes are strong enough to influence which house he'll be in. I can't imagine a Weasley not in Gryffindor, but only time will tell."

Hermione smiled. "You know, I always thought I would have made a good Ravenclaw—but I was happy when the Sorting Hat chose me for Gryffindor. I think it was the best place for me."

"I expect you would've done well in Ravenclaw as well," said Cho. "Penelope was telling me all about your apprenticeship and it sounds so exciting."

"Yes," agreed Penelope, "and I'm hoping to utilize your skills after Christmas. I can't seem to manage this Imprisonment Charm and there's pressure from everyone to hurry up. I'll ask Arthur to let me hire an assistant if you need a job straight away."

"Oh! I do actually, yes. I hope I can help," Hermione said, and bit her tongue before she could say anything self-deprecating about her Thinking skills. Or lack thereof. "How are the dragons?" Hermione asked Cho, for a change of subject. Cho didn't look nearly as tired or worn as Harry did, but there were lines around her eyes. "How are you holding up? That schedule is dreadful—I was telling Harry the other day that you need more riders, and he said you might have a few people interested?"

"A few?" Cho laughed. "Once people realized that Viktor Krum and Harry Potter are up at Azkaban, they started applying in droves. Trouble is, none of them have been able to pass Charlie's tests."

"Tests?" Hermione repeated, as a vision of the first task in the Triwizard Tournament flashed in her brain. She hugged Leo a bit closer.

"Flight tests first, on broomsticks." She rolled her eyes. "Quidditch drills. Not that he's wrong to do it, it's a safe way to weed people out, but he's so manic about Quidditch that the applicants tend to get confused. They keep asking me if these are the Wanderers' workouts and they've accidentally come to the wrong place."

Penelope laughed. "I think Percy was the only Weasley boy who escaped that obsession." She tickled Leo again. "Though if his uncles have anything to say about it, Leo won't go much longer without a proper broomstick."

"He's four months old!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Try telling that to Fred. He took Leo up on his broom a few weeks ago, while I was in the shower. I nearly killed him."

"Insane! Did you tell Angelina?"

"Oh yes. But go on Cho, I'm sorry. The other tests?"

"Right, well—about twenty-five percent of the applicants pass the flying tests."

"That few?" Hermione asked anxiously. Harry was never going to get a break if they were so exclusive. She couldn't believe that he was up there right now, in the cold, while the rest of them enjoyed Christmas. It made her feel terribly guilty; things never seemed to end for him.

"Well, keep in mind that most of the people who show up don't really want to do the work." Cho snorted. "Autograph hounds, Quidditch fans—" She lowered her voice. "Even a couple of girls who claim to be in love with Harry. They swear he'd marry them if he'd only meet them for a second."

"Pardon?" Ginny demanded. She was standing beside them, holding a plate of cookies and looking more exhausted than Cho did. Hermione had spent the last two days brushing up on what she knew about Healers, and she wondered what Ginny was feeling, to make her look so gray. Something must be draining her; she'd been fine at Lupin Lodge last night.

"Don't worry, Ginny," Cho said soothingly. "We sent them away and threatened to fine them for false misrepresentation if they applied again."

Ginny smirked, set the cookies on the living room table, and disappeared into the kitchen. Five seconds later, the cookies had disappeared as well, and every Weasley male, plus Max, had crumbs on his jumper.

"The ones who pass," Cho continued, glancing dubiously at Charlie, "are given a fundamentals exam on dragons. It's pathetic how little people know sometimes, honestly." She gave a disgusted sigh. "How hard is it to at least *guess* at six of the twelve uses of dragon's blood?"

Hermione nodded sympathetically and let Leo clutch her index finger with all his tiny digits. That felt so... nice. She kissed his face. "You're adorable," she murmured, and it struck her how horrible it was that his father would never know it. She put the thought away. No point in being morbid anymore today.

"Out of two hundred and some applicants, only seven were taken to the dragon enclosure. Only three didn't have near heart attacks when we led them into the camp and they saw how close they were really going to be to the dragons. Those three are in training now, and we'll see how they hold up, but even that'll take awhile..." Cho looked weary. She rubbed her eyes and launched into the sort of speech Hermione knew Harry would give, if he were the sort of person to admit how he was feeling. "I wish there were more of us. I hope we get some relief, we can't ride the dragons forever, it's just too draining. Half the time I feel like I'm messing up somehow—and it's not that it's difficult, they're at the point now where they behave and glide most of the time—and it's safer than a broomstick—but still, ten hours on dragonback every day is a lot. It's going to be a treat today to have supper at a table."

"You're doing a wonderful job." Charlie stood behind Cho and looked approvingly down at her. "Best rider we have," he said to Hermione and Penny. Hermione thought he looked a bit red in the face as he bumped Cho's shoulder with the old tattered suitcase he was holding. "I found my old dragons—do you want to see them?" Hermione and Penelope exchanged puzzled looks, and Charlie turned the suitcase around so that they could see the front. In fading paint it read: *Magical Model Dragon Set—They Really Fly!*

Cho followed Charlie to the other side of the room, and Hermione snickered. "His ears were red," she whispered to Penny.

"Dead giveaway," Penny replied with a straight face. "I tried to explain to Cho about the ears earlier, but she said I was talking nonsense. She seems to think they're just *friends*."

"She's in for a shock." Hermione smiled. She started to tickle Leo again, but his little chest hitched and he began to fuss. She gave him back to Penelope. "Someone needs his mummy."

Leaving Penny to feed Leo, Hermione moved over to the couch, sat down, and happily hugged her knees, watching silvery snow drift up against the frosted windows until it obscured her view of the blue and white fairy lights that dotted the ramshackle fence beyond the garden. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mr. Weasley disappear into the kitchen and drag his wife out of it, apron and all, to trap her beneath the mistletoe. Mrs. Weasley squealed and swatted him, but didn't seem to mind at all. Hermione giggled and her eyes wandered over to Ron—who was already staring at her again in a way that made her hot all over. Just like those letters. He had to stop looking at her like that in front of other people—it was almost obscene! It was also fantastic. She'd slept next to him again, last night, and the way he looked at her now reminded of her of exactly how he had kissed her and touched her, and of just how difficult it had been to hold back. Saying no was harder now than it had ever been; she had come back to find a man where there had been an overgrown boy. She had to wonder *why* she was still saying no. She didn't want to say no. It was more out of habit now, than anything... perhaps it was time for some serious reevaluation...

"So." A tall, solid redhead settled next to her on the couch, but Hermione hardly noticed him. He wasn't Ron. Ron had turned away again and was showing Max how to use the Levitating Charm to dress the tree.

"He's going to get a warning for Improper Use of Magic!" Hermione warned.

Ron grinned over his shoulder. "Oh, sure. Dad's the Minister, Hogwarts is out of session, and Max is going to get an angry owl any second now. Aren't you, Max?"

Max swished, flicked, and sent the star to the top of the Christmas tree. "Doubt it," he replied coolly, and Hermione laughed in spite of herself.

"Oh, all *right*," she muttered, settling back on the couch and finding that her peripheral vision now held not one, but two of Ron's older brothers.

"He's rather a hand with kids, isn't he?" observed Bill lightly, from her right.

Hermione felt suddenly and inexplicably nervous. Normally, when people asked her about her love life, she guiltlessly treated them to a proper indignant silence. She didn't know, however, if she could ignore Ron's brother.

"Erm," she answered intelligently. "Max seems to like him."

"Oh, I'd say Max is just about taken with him," Charlie agreed, from her left. "Not really surprising, is it? He's a decent enough fellow."

There was a silence, in which it became clear to Hermione that she was expected to answer.

"Oh-yes," she finally said. "Yes, he's... very decent." She wondered if the things that Ron had done to her just before she'd left for the Thinker qualified as decent.

"Now there's praise," Bill laughed. "I get the idea he has a pretty high opinion of you, too."

Hermione blushed, and couldn't think of what to say; her eyes drifted across the room to where Cho had returned to Penelope and Leo, floating several toy dragons through the air behind her. She tried to concentrate on that.

"You've been together how long?" Charlie asked.

"We... if you count... I... guess it's... it depends." Hermione wanted to kick herself.

Bill leaned forward. "Depends on what? Who we ask?"

Charlie grinned. "Well, where's Harry, then? He'll know—"

"They've been dating for two and a half years," Ginny said dully, walking by with another enormous plate of cookies, which she set on the table. "They've been together for seven and a half. And you can't ask Harry anything, Charlie, you horrible idiot, because he's at Azkaban on a dragon, where *you* put him." She turned on her heel and stalked back to the kitchen. The door slammed shut behind her.

"More like Mum every time I see her," Charlie muttered, scratching his head. "She used to be so cute, Hermione, you wouldn't believe it. Sweetest little kid in the world." He grabbed several cookies at once and popped one into his mouth. "Oy, Mum—" he yelled out, his voice thick through the crumbs. "These are great."

"I made them," Ginny yelled back. "And you'd better just save them for everybody else."

"I think 'everybody else' is code for 'Harry'," Bill observed.

Hermione wanted to hush them, but she didn't want to draw attention back to herself. She hoped they had finished questioning her, and that they would now get busy eating and move on to some activity other than giving her the third degree.

"Well, then, where were we?" Charlie turned back to her. "So you've been snogging our baby brother for awhile now."

Hermione went scarlet.

"Now, Charlie..." Bill warned, but he was grinning.

"Two and a half years," mused Charlie. "That's a long time—I've never had a girlfriend that long. Ronald's got ahead of us, William."

"It would seem so, Charles."

"Well then Percy and Fred got ahead of you too," shot Hermione. "Seems you're behind." She crossed her arms. They could both just stuff it. Bill and Charlie stared at each other in mock surprise, while Hermione concentrated on the back of Ron's head. She wasn't sure, but she assumed he could hear the whole conversation from where he stood—why didn't he make them stop it? She wasn't used to being teased, and he knew that, and he was only a few feet away. But if Ron could hear them, he made no sign of it. He handed an ornament to Max, and picked two more out of the box at his feet.

"You must know him well, then?" Bill prodded. "Better than most girls do, I expect?"

They weren't going to give up. It was on the tip of Hermione's tongue to tell Bill that she knew Ron better than his own family did, not to mention any girl anywhere, but she held it in. "Oh, I don't know," she answered airily. "You'd have to check around with other girls and find out what they know, before we could do any sort of honest comparison. I imagine I know... enough."

Ron's ears went pink, and though he continued to hang his ornaments, Hermione knew he was listening.

Charlie snickered. "Well, he warned us you were smart."

"Yeah, he did—speaking of which, it must've been fascinating to work with the Thinker," Bill said, turning to her and pulling one leg up on the couch, folding it so that his ankle crossed his knee. "What was it like?" he asked earnestly. All the teasing had gone out of his voice. "Greece is one place I've never been, and I've only ever read about the Thinking process—really cool stuff. Did you find it difficult?"

Hermione blinked at him. He *was* a little bit like Percy. "Cortona was beautiful," she answered slowly, "but Thinking... actually, it is difficult." She glanced at Bill, who was listening intently. "There's so much I want to try, but to be honest, nothing's ever come so hard, before, and I'm not sure I'm capable—"

"Oh, go on." Ron turned around, an ornament in each hand, and huffed at her. "Of course you're capable—you've been out there studying for four months, and when have you ever studied anything you couldn't learn?"

On either side of Hermione, Bill and Charlie settled back on the couch and watched. Ron flushed

a bit, but didn't back down.

"It's not that I couldn't *learn* it," Hermione answered carefully, noticing that Penny had stopped singing and was looking toward her as well. "It's... just I'm not... it isn't my strength. The meditating and the silence were really hard for me—but mostly it was the Thinking. I do much better when the information is already there, in books—I can put things together, but I have a difficult time drawing the answers out of thin air. Still, I'll try to use it the best I can, because there are so many things that need doing, and I *do* have the training."

"But you're not going to stay a Thinker?" Bill pressed.

"I'm not a Thinker as it is," Hermione laughed. "I'm just an apprentice. I should have stayed longer, and learned more. But I... couldn't stay." Fleeting, she met Ron's eyes. There was something in his gaze that stole her breath, and she looked away, trying to inhale properly. She could still feel his eyes on her, hot and steady; she wanted to get out of the room and go somewhere private, where Ron could hold her and look at her like that for as long as he wanted, without an audience.

"Cider, dears?" Mrs. Weasley was in the room.

There was a shattering sound. Ron had dropped one of his ornaments to the wooden floor. He stared at it, swallowing hard, his ears quite red. Hermione felt her own cheeks burn, and wondered if Mrs. Weasley had noticed the way they'd been looking at each other. She hoped not.

"Oh, Ron, that was Ginny's ornament—she made it when she was a tiny thing," Mrs. Weasley exclaimed. "Fix it before any of the pieces get lost, please."

"It's okay," Ginny shouted from the kitchen. "If it's the yellow thing with the paint all over it, I hated it anyway."

"Well *I* love it," Mrs. Weasley sniffed. "Here, I'll do it." She lifted her wand.

"Wait," Hermione interrupted, seeing her way out of the conversation with Bill and Charlie.

"Hold on, let's teach Max to do it, since he's apparently allowed to use magic." She darted away from the couch and knelt near Max, pulling her wand. "It's going to be that same motion you just did for the Levitation Charm—which was perfect, by the way."

Max tossed his sandy hair arrogantly, but he couldn't help smiling just a little.

"You'll swish and flick, and then it's going to be '*Reparo*'. You'll want to concentrate on all those pieces, and also concentrate really hard in your mind's eye—think of exactly what the ornament used to look like, and bring those pieces back together with the charm. All right?"

Max nodded and lifted his wand. The room was very still. "*Reparo!*" Max swished and flicked. Ron caught the newly mended ornament in his hand. "Nice!" he commended.

"Very well done," Hermione admitted, observing Max. He showed signs of being a rather powerful boy. Even *she* hadn't got the Repairing Charm right on her first go. Of course, she'd done it at home, without a teacher.

Max reached out for the ornament, which Ron handed him. "Cool," he mumbled, behaving almost like a normal child, as he hung his masterpiece on the tree.

"Cool," Ron repeated softly, and extended his hand across the table to Hermione. "Walk?" he asked casually.

Hermione took his hand, stood up, and gratefully hurried away from Bill and Charlie. "Yes, outside," she whispered.

Ron steered her out the door, to the tune of Bill's and Charlie's sniggers. He guided her around the side of the Burrow, and into a small spot between two snow-covered bushes, where there were no windows looking out on them.

Hermione shivered—she'd left her cloak inside—but she forgot about being cold when Ron gripped her waist and brought her to him, kissing the side of her neck.

"Sorry about my brothers," he mumbled, curling a hand into her hair.

"It's okay..."

Hermione softly rubbed her nose against his neck and kissed near his collar. "You smell nice," she murmured, lacing her arms around his solid neck. "And I do like these robes."

"Better than Muggle stuff?" Ron mumbled in her ear, nipping the lobe and returning to her neck.

"Oh—yes—you look—taller and more—I don't know—" Hermione caught a breath and sighed out a sound of pleasure as one of Ron's hands moved around to hold her lower back, and the other began to travel up her side.

"More what?" Ron kissed her bottom lip. "More impressive?" he offered, grinning. "More dignified?" He sealed his mouth over hers and kissed her deeply, making her groan. "More handsome?" he whispered, mock-sensually, pulling away and pecking her lips quickly, laughing.

"More of a pain in my—" Hermione stopped, smiling. Ron looked almost afraid of her next word.

He was so funny, never watching his own language in the slightest, but having a near heart attack if she came close to swearing. "Neck," she finished, tilting back her head, shutting her eyes and breathing steam into the cold December air, as Ron nuzzled her throat with his nose and lips.

Gravity shifted and Hermione gripped Ron tighter; he had lifted her off the ground. She made a noise of surprise and wrapped her legs around him and he backed her against the wall, trapping her between the Burrow and his body. Ron's hands curved beneath her, holding her up. Hermione could feel all his fingers. She looked straight into his eyes, searching him—he looked very serious, though his eyes were unfocused and his breathing was labored.

"I love you," he muttered suddenly.

Hermione's heart swelled for him—she untangled her arms from around his neck and held her hands to his face. "You *are* handsome," she whispered. "You know I think so. And these things you're wearing make you look older and... you're quite... I find you so attractive."

He flushed.

"Well, I do. And you're very good with Max."

"Oh, I just—you know." Ron blushed harder. "He's a good kid."

"He's a brat!" Hermione laughed. "He's precocious and arrogant. But he likes you." She softly kissed the tip of Ron's long nose.

"I've got practice winning over the precocious and arrogant," Ron replied, grinning. He tilted up his chin and brushed his open mouth across hers, then let his lips stay there, not kissing her, not pressing close. They breathed each other for a long time. "Did I get to say how much I missed you?"

"Say it again."

"I bloody missed you. Every day. Like hell."

Hermione bent her head and captured Ron's mouth with her own, kissing him with slow, intense desire. His tongue was hot, his hands firm, his body strong enough to hold hers up as he kissed her. Hermione held tightly to him, pulling away only to whisper in his ear; "I want you."

Ron shivered. She felt the hair stand up all over his body. She could feel everything.

"I want you, too." He made a hungry sound and kissed her throat, hard, bringing the skin into his mouth so that Hermione knew she'd be bruised in an hour. She didn't care. She could fix it with a Charm.

"I mean it." She was shocked to hear her voice, shocked to hear the words. She hadn't planned it like this. She had meant to... well...*plan* it.

Ron held her close, his arms like a vise, and put his mouth on hers. "What are you saying?" he mumbled against her lips. "What are you telling me, Hermione?"

"I want you," she repeated in a whisper of sheer heat. "I want you, I'm ready. Ron, I can't wait."

"Oh, God—" His cry was hoarse, victorious, and Hermione felt her body slammed against the house as Ron's lips met hers with a kind of ferocity she'd rarely known from him, and she gave over to it, reveling in the attack.

"Not-right here—" she managed, unsure of what his limitations were. He didn't seem to have any, at the moment. She wasn't even sure if Ron had heard her—he kept her pinned breathless against the side of the Burrow for a long, delirious moment. And then, without warning, he set her on her feet, keeping his hands where they had been beneath her.

"Of course not *here*," he murmured. "My mum's on the other side of this wall."

Hermione snorted, and buried her face against him. "True. Well... we could wait until the holidays are over, and we're back at your house."

"That's four days." Ron's voice was low and urgent in her ear. "Can you wait four days? Because I've been waiting three years, I can wait four days." He moved his hands meaningfully. "I don't *want* to wait four days. But I can do it."

Hermione, to her own shock, moved a little against his hands, and then against him. She drew up one leg and wrapped it around the outside of his thigh. "I don't think I can wait," she answered truthfully, her voice a whisper. She knew she must be pink in the face, but when she forced her eyes up to Ron's, she knew that it was all right to say whatever she wanted. His eyes had glazed over and he was looking down at her in a kind of blissful shock.

"You don't have to," he croaked, sliding his hand to her thigh and pressing her bent leg closer to his. "We can Apparate home right now."

"No we can't." But Hermione pushed against him, not sure how she was going to stand waiting even half a day. "Your mum's cooked that huge dinner and Harry's going to be here in half an hour—we can't leave yet."

"Hermione..." Ron groaned.

She climbed her fingers into his hair and stood on her one available tiptoe, to kiss him. "Merry

Christmas, Ron," she said softly, near his ear. He shuddered. "When we've all done with dinner and if Harry decides to sleep *here*, then if you and I are still awake—"

"We can go to my house."

Hermione paused. A yes now was a promise. She knew, of course, that she could stop Ron at any time, and that he would honor her wishes. But she would die before teasing him toward something that she wasn't ready to give—not that she hadn't teased a bit too far, already. Still, she searched herself, making sure that she was truly ready to give it. She reached for the hand that was on her leg and took it in her own, then stood on her two feet again and looked up at him. His mouth was a bit slack as he watched hers intently, as if he'd catch it up again in a kiss at any second. She knew what he was thinking. She knew all the freckles on his nose and neck. She knew the ones beneath his shirt. She knew his mind and his heart—knew the depths of his loyalty, and the strength of his soul.

She wanted to know the rest of him.

"Yes," she said quietly. "We can go to your house."

Ron's arms were around her at once and she sank into the warmth of him; he lay his cheek on her hair in silent gratitude, and they held on to each other in the falling dusk, preparing themselves. Anticipating.

"Your arms are cold," he murmured, running his hands up and down the length of them. "I didn't even realize you were out here without a cloak. I'm sorry."

Hermione snuggled into him. "I don't feel cold."

"Yeah, you do." He put his warm hands on either side of her neck. "You're freezing. And I can't have you getting sick *now*," he joked quietly. "Come on, let's go inside." He ran his hands up and down her arms again, took her hands in his, and laced his fingers into hers. For a long moment, he studied her face.

"What?" she whispered, a little unnerved by the intensity of his eyes as they traveled over every feature.

He shrugged, and dropped his eyes to their joined hands. "You."

She reached up a hand and smoothed his tousled hair, feeling it between her fingers. It was thick and a little wavy. A bit coarse. Beautiful red. She trailed her fingertips down his face and smiled a little, when he shivered.

"Cold?" she asked. She traced his jaw, and then the very Ron lines of his lips. She'd missed his face, every day. She'd gone over and over it in her mind, lying there alone in Cortona. She lightly scraped her fingernails back and forth over his mouth.

"No," he replied, clasping her wrist almost painfully tight, and shooting her a look so unmistakable that Hermione was hit by a rush of adrenaline, deep in the pit of her, "but if we don't go inside right now, I'm going to lose it, and you're not going to get to wait until after dinner."

Hermione dropped her hand, and let Ron lead the way back to the house.

* * * * *

Harry lifted the Omnioculars that hung around his neck and used them to scan the skyline while Norbert glided around Azkaban's foreboding perimeter. Cold wind whipped at his cheeks, which were about the only part of him not covered with special gear. Off in the distance he could see Mick atop Viking, covering lower ground, and the unmistakable pale-blond head of Draco Malfoy, who swooped along on the back of Mordor.

Harry checked his watch. Only one more hour to go before his shift ended. He'd make it to the Weasleys in time for Christmas dinner. Harry knew that Mrs. Weasley would have held dinner for him no matter what time he had to arrive, and that knowledge made him feel both awkward and comfortable at the same time. He was staying at the Burrow tonight, most likely doubled up in Ron's old room. This would be the first time that he'd slept under the same roof with Ginny since he and Ron had moved into the Notch in September—a thrill of anticipation shot through Harry, and he sat back on Norbert, allowing his eyes to close for a moment. He wanted to be there. He wanted to see Sirius's face when Mr. Weasley brought out his Christmas present. And the prospect of being near Ginny and kissing her again, like they had the other night, was enough to keep his Patronus good and strong. It would have been difficult today, without that thought to cling to.

Today, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about last Christmas. A year ago today, Ron had been in the hands of Death Eaters and Hagrid... they had lost Hagrid. Harry never allowed himself to remember those incidents, during his off hours, but up here he was forced to relive them every day, and today was worse than usual. A part of him was frightened that he might arrive at the Burrow to find someone dead, or missing, or something he couldn't even have predicted—after all, the world

had gone peaceful like this many times before, only to explode suddenly with some horrible new twist. Why not now?

He couldn't think like this. Using the same mental trick that he used to conjure a Patronus, Harry pushed the morbid thoughts to the back of his mind and searched for a happy memory. It was no surprise when an image of Ginny appeared in his head.

He wondered how Ginny would react to the gift that he had chosen for her and his stomach squirmed. Would she be happy about it? The shopkeeper had assured him that it was an essential tool for anyone involved in the Healing Arts, but when Harry pictured giving Ginny the simple-looking, white Healing cloth, it somehow didn't seem special enough. She'd put together a whole book for him on his birthday; he should have found her something better. He thought that the tasseled fringe and the embroidered "G" were a nice touch, but really, what did he know about it?

A sense of dizziness overtook Harry and he suddenly felt extremely light-headed. He sat forward, thinking that Norbert had taken a steep dive, but he soon realized that they were just very close to a small group of Dementors, who were trying to glide off the island. He pulled on Norbert's reins to urge the dragon downwards, and Norbert dove, apparently not affected by the Dementors' powers. It always amazed Harry how impervious the dragons were to the depression that filled the air. He always left each shift feeling hopeless and black, as though there were no point to any of it. But at least the Dementors didn't affect him as badly as they'd used to; he still heard the horrors of the past, but he could bear up under them now. Most of the time, he just felt numb.

"Expecto Patronum!"

Harry watched with grim satisfaction as a brilliant silver stag drove the Dementors back into the prison. Norbert shot flames at their retreating backs and Harry smiled a little—Norbert had no regard for rules. The dragons weren't supposed to breathe fire at the Dementors. Fire had little effect on them, and often the flames flew backwards towards the rider, but Harry didn't mind. He put up a shield to deflect the rush of burning air, then urged Norbert upward to their assigned altitude. Norbert balked a bit. It seemed he wanted to play in the sea—perhaps find another giant sea monster to roar at, like the Nesstor he'd befriended the other day. Sometimes Harry could swear that Hagrid somehow inhabited the body of his old dragon friend.

The familiar warning bell sounded, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief. His shift was nearly over. Using his Omniculars again, he saw the reserve riders mounting for their shift and lining up in preparation for flight. Mick began to circle the prison boundaries a final time, and Harry followed, glancing over his shoulder and expecting to see Malfoy directing Mordor in a similar fashion.

But the sky to his east was empty. No one was patrolling Malfoy's third of the island. Annoyance pricked at Harry. He didn't want to miss any of the Weasley Christmas dinner; Malfoy had been whinging that morning about having a day off once in a while—if he'd landed early without waiting for his replacement... Harry looked in towards the shore and frowned. Where was that idiot? There was no sign of Mordor's familiar brilliant red anywhere along the shoreline, and Harry returned his eyes to the prison. Perhaps Malfoy had just flown temporarily behind a turret, or was flying low behind the walls, but as Harry rounded the east side of the island, he still saw nothing but vacant sky. A bad feeling overcame Harry and he tapped his wand to his ear—he hated talking to Malfoy, but he could see no other choice.

"Malfoy?" he said aloud, feeling idiotic, as always, at talking out loud when no one was in front of him to hear. "Malfoy?" There was no answer. He'd try one more time before he tried to contact Mick. "Malfoy, seeing as it's Christmas, I'd appreciate—"

But he never finished his sentence. A loud noise overhead caused him to dive on instinct, and he barely got out of the way in time. Mordor was plummeting, giving a miserable, ear-splitting whine that Harry had never heard from a dragon before. Smoke trailed from Mordor's nostrils, thick and black, and though he opened his massive jaw he seemed incapable of producing fire. He gave another whine and spiraled lower towards the sea. Atop him, Draco Malfoy waved his wand to no effect, looking terrified and confused as he and his dragon dropped past Harry, lurching to the surface of the water.

Harry watched for a moment, amused, and wished that Ron could be there to witness Malfoy lose his cool, when he remembered that it was his job to try to help his fellow dragon-riders, even if they happened to be old school enemies. And Malfoy *had* helped to save his life a few weeks earlier... Harry grudgingly pushed Norbert into a dive and tapped his wand to his ear again. "Mick, give me a hand, Malfoy's having trouble."

No reply came, and soon Harry understood why. Just beyond Mordor, Viking's wings had suddenly begun to pound with such force that Harry sharply veered Norbert toward Azkaban, certain that they must be under attack by a swarm of Dementors—but he saw nothing. Still, Viking roared and bucked, rearing back so that Mick was forced to cling to his harness with both hands. But the

harness wouldn't help for long—it looked as though Mick's entire saddle was about to fall off, and no amount of Binding charms would be able to keep him in the air if that happened.

Norbert gave an ugly snort and pounded his wings once—too hard. Harry tapped his ear again in panic—if all the dragons went mad at once, there would be no holding back the Dementors. “EVERYONE OUT HERE NOW!” he shouted.

In seconds, a team of dragon keepers on broomsticks sped out to the island, with the reserve Greens right behind them. As the dragons riders took up their patrol stations, the keepers surrounded Mick, whose saddle was hanging at an odd angle off of Viking's side. Mick began to fumble with his harness buckles but he couldn't get out of them fast enough—he tried to grab his broom—

The sun, which was in the final stages of setting, chose that moment to shine its brightest and a shaft of light forced Harry's eyes shut. When he reopened them, the bright white dots cleared to a vision of Mick and his entire saddle falling from Viking, who was thrashing and turning somersaults in the air. As Mick fell, several of the keepers pointed their wands at him and released him from his bindings. Mick's gear fell with a loud thud into the water, and from above, Viking raised his head and let out a piercing shriek. Harry dove steeply, and attempted a Levitation Charm to prevent Mick from hitting the water, but a large jet of fire from Viking intercepted the spell, and he could see nothing but smoke.

“We've got him!” One of the dragon-keepers sent the announcement to Harry. “I'm taking him in. He's breathing but he's knocked out.” Harry only had a moment to be relieved that Mick had survived the fall before another keeper's voice sounded in his ear. “Where the hell is the Fireball?”

“This side!” came Lisa's voice. Harry saw green sparks shoot up beyond the east wall of Azkaban and he urged Norbert towards them. Norbert resisted and gave his wings another fierce flap, but Harry pulled hard on his reins and finally the Ridgeback gave in and rounded the wall.

Mordor was falling like a stone towards the water and Malfoy, who had already removed his bindings, made a lunge for his broomstick. As Harry watched in only part-horror, Malfoy's hand missed. He tumbled from the side of his dragon and plunged into the sea. Mordor seemed to be about to fall in with him, but just as Harry thought he was going to hit the water, he lifted his long scarlet neck and pulled himself out of his dive. His wings and feet skimmed the surface and he blew a jet of beautiful fire, lighting the sky around him.

And lighting the water. Malfoy was in the water—Harry narrowed his eyes. Malfoy's head seemed to be disappearing under the waves. Couldn't he...

Harry didn't wait to work it out. He was unwilling to leave Norbert flying freely, but there was little choice. He unbuckled his straps and grabbed his Firebolt. It was just in time, too, because Norbert chose that precise moment to let out his own wrathful roar, and made such a sharp turn that had Harry not had the Firebolt in his hand, he would have fallen as well.

“Oi! Potter, you idiot! Over—” Malfoy glubbed. “Here! Over here!” His voice was faint over the rush of water and waves, but his hair made such a stark contrast to the dark water that Harry was able to pinpoint his location at once. Feeling only slightly relieved that Malfoy was alive, Harry sped towards him, and helped heave him onto the back of the Firebolt. Malfoy's enormous ring dug into the palm of Harry's hand as he pulled—“Have a care, Potter—” he spat, and shook Harry's grip from his hand. He slid far back on the broom, panting. “Took you long enough,” he snapped.

Harry had a not-unfamiliar desire to throw Malfoy back into the water, but, knowing he couldn't do that, he took a deep breath. “Hold on!” he shouted, hoping that Malfoy would grab onto the broom and not to him. He sped off towards the camp, noting with relief that a few of the dragon keepers seemed to have calmed Norbert, and that the others were guiding Viking inland without too much trouble.

When they hit the ground outside the dragon-hangers, several assistants rushed towards them, dragging Malfoy off of the back of the Firebolt and attempting to assess if he was in one piece. Malfoy stood with his nose in the air, dripping wet and sniping about whiplash and incapable species specialists, but Harry tuned him out, choosing instead to make sure that the other dragons were accounted for. He watched as Norbert and Viking were returned to their enclosures, and as Mordor, who was usually nasty to everyone except Malfoy, had allowed Lisa to fly him in. She dismounted, grabbed a broom, and headed back out to her own Welsh Green, for her reserve shift.

Everything seemed to be well taken care of. Harry sagged as exhaustion hit him like a tidal wave. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, wanting nothing more than to Disapparate to where it was warm and people were waiting for him—but first he headed to the hospital tent.

He was relieved to see Mick's eyes open.

“I don't know what happened,” Mick exclaimed, wincing. “He's never thrown me before, and I've raised him from a baby.” He wore the expression of a father whose son had just betrayed him. “There were Dementors down there, weren't there?” he asked hopefully.

Harry shook his head. "I didn't see any," he admitted, feeling terrible as Mick's face fell.

"There were no Dementors," said a cold voice. Malfoy stood in the tent flap; he was wearing an enormous fur coat and he had a bandage wrapped around his head. Harry fought the urge to roll his eyes—the only problem with Malfoy's head was his brain. "Dragons are simply dangerous creatures, and when improperly cared for, they will act like murderous beasts."

"You know they're checked on every day," said Harry, not in the mood to let Malfoy bully anyone, let alone Mick.

But Mick didn't seem to notice either of them. "Rose is going to *kill* me," he muttered, wincing again. "Shortest marriage on record...and our parents don't even *know* yet... I'm going to be late for Christmas dinner...bloody dragon..."

"I see," said Draco, his voice haughty. "Well. Perhaps if the Secretary Privy had spent more time concentrating on her job, and less time getting into your trousers, we would have healthy dragons."

Mick's head snapped toward the tent flap; he looked horrified, as if he'd only just noticed Malfoy standing there. He swore and tried to get out of bed, but the mediwizard attending him held him down.

"Go home, Malfoy," Harry said wearily, and then, mechanically—"Happy Christmas."

"Oh, I'm sure it will be," hissed Malfoy, his eyes glinting, "as it's our first Christmas without my *father*."

Harry couldn't bring himself to feel sorry. He remembered too clearly how Lucius Malfoy had tried to hurt Ginny. How he *had* hurt Ginny, and the Grangers, and how he and his pawns had systematically destroyed so many decent people.

"Tell that murdering Weasley who thinks he's the Minister that I'll bring a written complaint in with me tomorrow."

It was on the tip of Harry's tongue to say that it wasn't murder to get rid of monsters, but Mick cut him off.

"Look, why not just *quit*?" he shouted. "We've got three new riders in training, Malfoy, were you aware of that, or are you too busy being a spoiled little prig to see anything else? You're not as invaluable as you'd like to think. So if you're just going to be miserable—*quit*."

A pink tinge rose in Malfoy's pale cheeks and he did not answer. He pulled his wand with such intent that Harry pulled his own in defense, thinking that curses were coming—but Malfoy only Disapparated.

Harry and Mick stared in silence at the empty tent flap. "D'you want me to go get Charlie?" Harry asked, after a minute. "I'm going to the Burrow right now. I can have him here in a minute."

"Well," said Mick, pushing the mediwizard away and getting out of bed, "if you're going over there anyway, then you might as well fill him in on what's just happened. I'm going to go talk to Viking. And then I'm going to go and look like a royal arse." He limped out of the tent.

Harry prepared to Disapparate but it took him some moments to gather sufficient concentration. He felt terrible. He probably looked terrible. There had been bags under his eyes this morning; they had probably doubled, and he knew his hair wasn't anything to be proud of on the best of occasions. Still, no one was going to care. Mrs. Weasley would only fuss over him more than ever, and Ginny... well, if she was in it for looks, then she'd already seen all his worst ones. He had them to look forward to. And Ron, and Hermione—Sirius and Remus, the twins, Mr. Weasley... everyone.

For a brief, brief moment, and very accidentally, Harry felt sorry for Draco Malfoy.

At the Burrow, he found the Weasleys just sitting down to dinner, and they looked so happy to see him, and so pleased to be together, that he hoped that Charlie would eat something before asking him what was the matter.

He had no such luck. Charlie noted at once that Harry looked worse than usual and demanded to know if anything had gone wrong. At the mention of Draco being thrown, Ron sniggered in delight, but when Harry mentioned that Mick O'Malley had also been tossed into the sea and knocked out, the outcry was deafening. Charlie looked absolutely panicked. He and Cho wasted no time gathering their things and departing to investigate the mess, and Harry felt, looking at their empty chairs, as though he'd ruined something just by showing up.

He showered upstairs, changed quickly, and returned to the kitchen much cleaner but just as exhausted, hardly noticing the cheerful holly-decked banister or the fairy lights that twinkled merrily in the front room. He still felt cold and detached from the hard day's ride, but the kitchen was warm and bright, and the smell of roast dinner made it difficult to dwell on dragon accidents. Mrs. Weasley bustled him straight into Charlie's empty chair, heaped Christmas dinner in front of him, and returned to the worktop, where the gravy was sieving itself. The long table was crowded even without Charlie and Cho, but it was far too quiet. Harry glanced at Mr. Weasley, who was

frowning at the turkey.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, and his voice sounded very loud in the quiet room. "I really didn't want to shake everyone up, or make Charlie miss dinner or anything."

Someone's foot touched Harry's under the table. "It's all right, Harry. Happy Christmas."

Harry looked up to see that Mrs. Weasley had seated him right across from Ginny. He wondered if that meant she didn't mind about the article in *Charmed Life*, and winced at the memory of that picture. He hoped that no one else remembered, and made a mental note to himself not to look at Mr. Weasley again unless it was absolutely necessary. Ginny gave him a bracing smile, though she looked strangely pale, and nudged his knee with hers.

"Tuck in, go on."

Harry peered at her. Her smile didn't fool him; her voice was scratchy and she sounded sad and tired. He opened his mouth to ask her what the problem was, but was cut off.

"That's right, Harry dear," Mrs. Weasley said, as she returned to the table with a giant gravy boat and floated it down the table to Fred, who already had his hands out. "Eat up. What on earth is everyone waiting for? It's going to get cold!"

"I'm not waiting, Mum!" said George cheerfully. He nicked the gravy boat from Fred and drowned his plate. Within a few minutes, the table was alive with chatter. Fred and George launched into a detailed description of their latest line of candies, Singing Sweets—"Each one's enchanted with a different song, and if you eat one, you'll sing a few bars whether you like it or not—here, Bill, you pop this one in your mouth, and Sirius, you take this one..." Angelina grinned at Mrs. Weasley's almost timid suggestion of a belated wedding reception. "You're sure you wouldn't mind the trouble, Molly? Because that would be wonderful..." Hermione and Ron seemed lost in a world of their own at the other end of the table; Harry couldn't hear their conversation, but he could hardly miss the look Ron was giving Hermione, or the fact that Ron, in an unprecedented display of lovesickness, had not even touched his dinner. Even Penelope seemed to be enjoying herself—she must have put Leo to bed already, and was now smiling as she helped Mrs. Weasley and Angelina with their plans.

Ginny, on the other hand, was silent. She lifted the same bite of food to her mouth several times, but never managed to take it.

"What's wrong?" Harry whispered, tapping her shoe with his.

Ginny started. She shook her head quickly, and glanced at her mother. "Don't," she said shortly, but her reaction only doubled Harry's concern.

"Ginny, is it—"

She gave him a warning look, and he knew she didn't want to be questioned. But he could tell that something was troubling her, and he knew that it was probably his presence. His day at Azkaban had been particularly bad, and yet he felt almost fine again, which meant that she had probably absorbed his troubles and made herself ill. She was very white, and there were bags under her eyes.

"Am I hurting you?" he asked, as quietly as he could.

Ginny gave him a pained sort of glare, and Harry realized that Bill Weasley, who was sitting right beside him, was suddenly giving him a curious and distrustful look. He must have been louder than he'd realized.

Bill opened his mouth. "What does that—" he began slowly.

"I know!" Ginny said loudly, causing everyone at the table to hush up and look at her. "Let's have a game. We're never together like this—let's play..." She floundered.

"I Spy!" Fred finished for her.

"Oh, good'n," George chimed in, through a mouthful of potatoes. "I spy a col'r and the col'r is... 'Ellow."

"The curtains!" shouted a young boy who Harry realized must be Max.

"Mum's sleeves!" put in Bill.

And Ginny's diversion succeeded. By the time Mrs. Weasley had brought out the pudding, I Spy had led into a game of Cities, Countries and Constellations, in which Hermione and Bill were competing so fiercely that the rest of the family had given up playing and taken sides to cheer them on. The Burrow kitchen shook with happy noise, and when Ginny murmured that she wanted to boil water for tea, Harry barely heard her. But he didn't miss the way her hands shook when she pushed in her chair, and when she went straight past the kettle and into the living room, Harry felt a stab of anxiety. She looked terrible, and he knew that he was probably the worst person in the world to go near her and help her, but he couldn't bring himself to sit still. And he didn't want to worry anyone else—even Remus was laughing and engrossed in the game, and had not seen Ginny's exit.

"Africa!"

"America!"

"Andromeda!"

Bill growled. "We've *used* all the other A's!" he said in despair. "Why do they all have to *end* in A?"

"Afghanistan doesn't," Max said smugly.

"Afghanistan!" Bill cried.

"Cheating!" Hermione shouted. "But I don't care—Nigeria! Ha! Another A!"

No one noticed Harry leave the table. He slipped out of the kitchen and into the twinkling front room, where Ginny was huddled in one corner of the sofa with her eyes squeezed shut, hugging her legs close to her body. She winced each time more laughter erupted from the kitchen, and her breath hitched. It looked to Harry as if she were about to cry, or be sick.

"Oh, Harry," she choked.

Harry jumped.

"I know you're there," she went on without opening her eyes. "You can go back and play. I'll be f-fine."

Harry took a step closer to her, but hesitated. "Is it me?" he asked. "Just tell me, and I'll go home. I'd rather go home than sit here and make you ill, honestly."

"It's not y-you." Ginny gave a great sob and buried her face in her knees.

Harry looked over his shoulder. No other Weasleys were in sight. He hurried to Ginny and sat close enough to touch her, but held back. "Would you like... water, or something?" he offered, not sure of what to do.

She opened her eyes and tears flooded down her cheeks, shining in the fairy lights. "P-Percy's not h-here," she blurted on a sob. "He's really d-dead."

Harry stared. That was the last thing he had expected her to say.

The laughter in the kitchen stopped so abruptly that it seemed to have been switched off, and Harry knew that they had all heard her. The Burrow went eerily silent, except for the ticking of the clock and the choking sound of Ginny's voice as she tried to speak again.

"I n-never c-ried about it because I never r-realized he was really g-gone until this m-morning when it was C-Christmas and he wasn't here, and n-now I know he's not coming b-back..."

She dissolved. Harry watched her sink into herself, crying and rocking, and he didn't know what to do. He moved closer to her and put his arms around her; Ginny shifted at once and buried herself in him, continuing to sob into his jumper. Harry held her tightly, but could not think of a word to say. He had never seen her like this.

"Oh, Ginny."

Harry glanced over his shoulder to see Mrs. Weasley standing in the kitchen doorway, wearing a look on her face that he remembered from Percy's memorial service. She met Harry's eyes, and he had to look down.

"Is she all right?" Remus appeared over Mrs. Weasley's shoulder. He and Sirius came into the room, looking very anxious.

Harry wasn't sure. He shrugged and tightened his arms around Ginny, who was crying so hard that her tears had seeped through to his T-shirt. He felt a damp patch on his shoulder and, despite how strange it was to have Mrs. Weasley watching, he kissed Ginny softly on the top of her head. "Shh," he said quietly, hoping that only Ginny could hear him. "I've got you, okay?"

Ginny sobbed and nodded against him, and Harry softly moved a hand up and down her back, following instincts that were entirely new, but quite strong. Still, it was really weird, doing this in the Burrow, and he was glad that Mr. Weasley wasn't in the room. Or Bill.

"She'll be all right." It was Penelope's voice. Harry didn't dare look back at her—it had been hard enough to look at Mrs. Weasley's face, but Penelope... She'd lost something that Harry couldn't even begin to think about. It would have been like losing Ginny. He clutched at her reflexively. Soft footsteps padded away up the stairs and Harry didn't blame Penelope for getting out of the room. A moment later, however, the footsteps returned, and to Harry's surprise, Penelope stood over the two of them, dry-eyed, holding Leo in her arms.

"Here Ginny," she said softly. "Take him."

Ginny picked up her head and blinked up at her sister in law. Her face was a mess; Harry pushed her hair out of it for her but realized he couldn't reach his trouser pocket to get at the Healing Cloth. It didn't matter—Mrs. Weasley was ahead of him. She came to the sofa with tissues and water; Ginny took the tissues and blew her nose before reaching out for the soft little bundle Penelope offered. Leo nestled against her without a murmur and went right back to sleep. Ginny

sniffled and stared glassily down at her little nephew.

"Thanks," she mumbled.

Harry kept his arm around them both and watched Ginny's face. It was strange, but he thought he could actually see the bags under her eyes receding, and the color creeping back into her cheeks. He remembered her once saying that Leo was a relief to her. Perhaps holding babies was something Ginny ought to do more often. And she did look sweet like this. Natural. This whole thing sort of... *felt* natural, in a bizarre and foreign way, like getting to another country and finding out that he could already speak the language. His mum and dad had been young when they'd had him—he wondered how his dad had felt about it.

Harry went red as it struck him what he was considering. What in the hell was he thinking about?

"All right, Ginny?" It was Ron. He and Hermione came in and hovered at the end of the sofa. Ginny nodded, and Ron's eyes moved from her, to the baby, to Harry, then back to Ginny, and deliberately back to Harry again. Ron quirked an eyebrow and Harry's face grew hotter as he realized that Ron was probably having thoughts similar to his own. But he kept his arm around Ginny and the baby, even when Mr. Weasley and Bill came in a moment later, towing Max. Bill gave Harry a rather ominous look, and Harry swallowed.

"What's wrong with *her*?" Max complained as the family settled into the myriad mismatched chairs and onto the carpet in front of the fireplace. "Both my *parents* died," he went on impressively, swaggering up to the sofa, "and I *never* cried." He raked his eyes over Harry's forehead, and tossed his sandy hair. "Bet you didn't either."

Harry stared at him, openmouthed.

"If you want something to cry about," Ron muttered, "I'll give you—"

"Didn't you really?" Ginny interrupted quietly. She gave Max a long, studious look and the room stayed quiet; Harry had a feeling that the rest of them were as shocked as he was by Max's offensive behavior.

But Ginny seemed to have other ideas. She turned and offered Leo to Harry.

"Take him, would you?" she asked. "And scoot down. I want Max to sit here with me for a minute."

Harry obeyed, cradling the baby in awkward arms and clearing the center cushion for Max, who looked disdainfully at the empty spot.

"What for?" Max demanded.

"Because... I want to tell everyone something, and I want you to be my assistant." Ginny looked at Remus. "I *can* do this," she said firmly. "So just let me."

Harry realized at once what Ginny was about to tell her family—he exchanged excited, worried looks with Ron and Hermione, and with Sirius, while the rest of the room looked at Ginny in confusion.

Remus glanced at her parents. "Are you sure, Ginny?"

"Positive," Ginny answered. "I won't hurt myself, or him."

Max stepped back. "What's going on?" he asked edgily. "What're you talking about? Who's getting hurt?"

No one else asked questions, but they all looked as curious as Max sounded. Mr. Weasley and Bill leaned forward in their chairs by the fire; Fred and George had turned around on the carpet to look up at Ginny; Penelope and Angelina perched in the window nook and fixed their eyes on Max; and Mrs. Weasley stood in the kitchen doorway again, looking from Remus to Sirius with anxious eyes.

"It's a secret," Ginny told Max. "But I'm going to tell it, and you're going to help me." She patted the empty cushion. "Sit down."

Max did, very gingerly. "Don't hurt me."

Ginny laughed softly. "Then be very still," she instructed, "and very, very quiet."

"Crazy house," Max muttered, but he shut his mouth when Ginny raised her hands in front of him, and his eyes went wide with terror.

Ginny's eyes, on the other hand, fell shut. Harry watched her face and Max's, rapt. This was so incredible—*she* was so incredible. He could hear everyone breathing in the silence; Hermione's breath in particular was quick and labored, and Harry knew she must be beside herself with excitement to know about Ginny. She'd probably read ten books about Healers in the past three days. She could probably tell them both where to find new ones.

Slowly, Ginny dragged her fingers through the air, stopping above Max's head, then above his shoulders, and finally over his heart. She moved her hands gently, seeming to work with some

great knot of energy, which was the way the books had described it. Harry wondered what she was feeling, or if it was hurting her—he thought it might be. Her color was fading again and her freckles looked darker against her skin by the second. She pulled back her hands and took a shaking breath, then went on working.

Max's face had gone slack and his eyes were very wet. He began to take heaving breaths, as if working up to an enormous sob.

"It's all right," Ginny murmured, opening her eyes to look at him. "Tell me."

Max stared at Ginny as if mesmerized. "It was just the once," he whispered. "I only cried once. Just the first night I found out." His chin trembled, and Harry's did too; he looked down at Leo and tried to focus his own blurry vision. The poor kid. It had probably been worse for him—after all, he'd had eleven years to get used to having parents. "Could you stop now?" Max whispered.

Ginny dropped her hands, and Max gasped as if he'd been struck. The glazed look went out of his face and was replaced with one of anguished fury.

"I'm so sorry, Max," Ginny gazed at him. "We all are."

Max stared at her for another moment, his chest heaving. Then he leapt to his feet and bolted out the door into the snow. The door slammed.

"I'll get him," said Ron, and darted after Max. The door slammed again.

Everyone else stared at Ginny. She leaned back on the cushions, still pale and breathing irregularly, and looked at her hands.

"You're joking," Bill breathed. He gripped the arms of his chair. "There's no way. There is *no way*."

"What?" said Fred and George at once.

"She's a..." Bill shook his head. "Ginny, did you just..."

"She's a Healer." Mr. Weasley gave a dry laugh, and several people sucked in their breath. "Well, I'll be damned."

"A Heal—no! Not—but Arthur!" Mrs. Weasley whirled on Remus. "Did you *know*?"

"Are you *really*?" demanded Bill, before Remus could open his mouth. Bill was out of his chair, looking like his might come out of his skin as well. "Ginny, can you actually—with plants, and animals and—"

"You'd be the first one in over fifty years," Penelope said, looking awed. "If you are one. Are you?"

"A Healer?" Fred looked nonplussed. "What, like a mediwizard? She can't be, can she? She's not even out of school."

"She'd have to apprentice," added George. "Not to mention get N.E.W.T.s in just about everything."

Bill shook his head impatiently. "Not like a *mediwizard*," he scoffed. "It's completely different, it's difficult to explain—honestly, didn't you two ever pay attention in History of Magic?"

"It's Empathic Magic," Hermione said softly, and a dozen heads swiveled towards her. "Possessed only by very rare individuals. You can't train for it, you have to be born with it. It's a gift."

"Right," said Bill.

"Oh shut up, Bighead number one," said Fred, sitting back on his heels and crossing his arms to address Hermione. "So how does it work?"

"Well... Healers are sensitive to energy of all kinds—plants, beasts and creatures."

"Creatures?" Mrs. Weasley repeated.

"Well, humans," said Hermione. "But everyone else, too. Merpeople, giants—"

"House-elves?" George suggested, waggling his eyebrows.

Hermione gave him a withering look. "Anyway, Healers can work with energy, and correct it through a completely intuitive, nearly psychic process. Mostly what they feel is..." she glanced at Ginny and Harry. "Pain. Physical and emotional."

"Pain?" Mrs. Weasley said anxiously. "Ginny, are you all right?"

"Other people's pain," Hermione cut in gently. "Second hand. It doesn't *cause* physical pain in the Healer—that is, not generally." She glanced at Harry again. "It's just the signpost the Healer uses to know where to begin working. The books say that it's like untying knots in the air around the afflicted subject, and that some are more difficult to undo than others." She paused. "Is that true, Ginny?"

For the first time since Max had left the room, Ginny looked up. "Yes," she said. She looked at Harry. "Could I have Leo back, please?"

Harry returned to the middle cushion and gave her the baby at once. Ginny shifted closer against him and, after a wary look at Bill and Mr. Weasley, Harry carefully put his arm around her

shoulders. No one seemed to notice or care this time, though, and Ginny's grateful smile sent such a warm feeling through Harry that he didn't care who minded. It seemed that he no longer had a terrible effect on Ginny, and he hoped that it would last. He didn't want her to have to explain any of *that* to her family.

"Then you *are*." Bill rubbed the bridge of his nose and stared at Ginny as if he'd never seen her before. Which, Harry thought proudly, he probably hadn't. "You really are. A Healer."

"I really am."

"How long have you known?" asked Mr. Weasley quietly. His eyes, behind his glasses, were tired and troubled, but Harry could see the pride in them.

"Four months. Remus worked it out first, and he's been helping me study—no, Mum, leave him alone. I'm seventeen and it's my business and I wanted to tell you on my own."

Mrs. Weasley gave Remus a resentful look, but nodded. She still looked as if she hadn't fully accepted the new information. "A Healer," she said blankly. "Well. I suppose I should have expected it. You're the most... shocking children I..." She rubbed her head. "And just what will you *do*?" she demanded. "How will you use it? What..." She waved her hands helplessly in the air.

"Well... if Dad'll hire me, then I have one idea—" Ginny began, but the front door slammed open and cut her off. Ron came through it, carrying Max around the waist. Max was blue and shivering, but kicking as if his life depended on it.

"Bloody BRAT," Ron roared. "You'd've frozen—"

Max kicked Ron's shin and Ron dropped him. "HA!" Max shouted, and made for the door again.

Ron lunged after him. Mrs. Weasley raised her wand. "*Petrificus Totalus*," she said casually, and stuck her wand back in her pocket.

Max clunked to the floor, blinking rapidly. His face had frozen in a contorted expression of fury.

"Take him to his room, would you, Ron, dear?"

"I'll take him back to Diagon Alley if you like," Ron began.

But Mrs. Weasley only laughed. "He's staying here," she said stoutly, and gave Max a hard look. "That hex will wear off in about an hour," she told him. "But your door and window will be locked until we've had a talk. I'll be up in a bit. And if you tear the room apart before I get there, I warn you—you'll regret it."

Max grunted something that Harry suspected would have been a curse word if he could have moved his mouth.

"Good night to you too, dear," said Mrs. Weasley pleasantly, and Ron floated Max's stiff body up the stairs. "What were you saying, Ginny?"

"Mum's in her element again," Fred whispered to George, and the two of them snickered. Mrs. Weasley put her hand to her wand and arched her eyebrows at them. They went quiet.

"I was just saying," Ginny said, looking at Mr. Weasley with pleading eyes, "that I think I could be a lot of use to the Ministry right now."

Mr. Weasley nodded. "I'm sure you could," he said. "And of course I'll want to bring you on as soon as you've taken your N.E.W.T.s—if I'm still acting Minister, that is."

Mrs. Weasley made an exasperated noise. "You will be."

"No, Dad. I could be useful *now*," Ginny gave Harry a fleeting look and he squeezed her shoulders encouragingly. She straightened up a bit, and took a deep breath. "I want you to let me come to Azkaban and sort out what's wrong with the dragons."

"NO." Mr. Weasley, Sirius, Remus, Bill and Harry had all spoken at once.

"No?" Ginny turned on Harry, holding Leo close and keeping her voice down. "Did *you* just say no?"

Harry took his arm away from her shoulders—she clearly didn't want it there now. "Yes," he said. "You can't go to Azkaban."

"You... I... *can't*?" She looked furious. "You're up there every day. You're *falling off of dragons*. Mick O'Malley and Draco Malfoy fell *into* the ocean today and you're telling me I can't come and *do* something about it?"

Leo stirred in his blankets. His eyes scrunched up. He gave a little hiccough, and began to cry.

"Damn it," Ginny muttered. "Look what you did."

Harry opened his mouth to protest that *he* hadn't been shouting, but Penelope came and plucked Leo out of the fray.

"Good luck, Ginny," she said wryly, and carried her son upstairs.

"Give me one good reason why I can't," Ginny said, turning back to her father. "Go on."

"Because you don't need to," said Mr. Weasley. He still hadn't taken his eyes off her. "We'll work

out something else."

"Like?"

"Something else," said Bill flatly, but he hadn't stopped staring at Ginny either. "A *Healer*," he repeated.

"Yes, a Healer, Bill," Ginny said angrily. "Not that it matters, apparently."

"Are you really the only one in fifty years?" George asked suddenly. "Wow."

Ginny ignored him. "Mum," she pleaded. "Tell them to let me help. I *can*. I'm really good. Remus, tell them."

But Remus said nothing, and Mr. Weasley looked at George. "There haven't been any Healers since the forties," he said quietly. "When there were two. But they were tortured and killed by Grindelwald and..." He returned his eyes to Ginny. "This is an enormous responsibility."

"I *know*. So say I can Heal the dragons."

"I can't let you do that," Mr. Weasley said.

Ginny gave a little growl of anger. "Of course you can!" she shouted. "You're the Minister of bloody Magic!"

"Ginny," Mrs. Weasley admonished. "Please don't swear."

"And if you won't let me," Ginny went on without acknowledging her mother, "then I'll just write a letter to the Secretary Privy!"

"So will I," Remus said calmly. "To inform her that you are a novice."

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley looked relieved. Ginny looked murderous.

"So this is how you managed the Wolfsbane Potion," Bill said slowly. "All right. I get it..."

"Funny you're just finding out about this now, Ginny," George said thoughtfully. "I mean, no offense, but it would've been helpful to have you Healing people a year or two ago, wouldn't it?"

"Oh *thanks*," Ginny shot back.

"Actually, Ginny's very young to develop evident powers," Hermione said, and Harry turned in surprise at the obvious anger in her voice. She was on Ginny's side, obviously, and would probably have a lot to say about it. He sighed to himself, and Hermione continued. "Healers often don't find out what they are until they're halfway through their lives—sometimes they don't find out at *all*. But if a person with latent Empathic Magic goes through a traumatic experience at a very young age, then by the late teens or early twenties, it's possible for that person's powers to rise to the surface. Ginny is unusual and *remarkable*."

Ginny put her chin in the air. "Thanks, Hermione."

"So the war traumatized her and now she's got powers?" Fred grinned. "Cool."

"She had the powers all along, and it probably wasn't the war that did it," Hermione replied. "It was probably much earlier, because it takes years for Healing powers to rise to maturation once they're woken."

Fred frowned and looked at Ginny. "So it must've been..."

George's eyebrows shot up. "It was that di—"

"Never mind." Ginny stood up. "You're all horrible—except for Hermione—and I'm going to write my letter."

"Hey, I didn't say anything!" Ron exclaimed, appearing on the stairs. "I'm not horrible." He hurried back to Hermione. "Am I? Did I say anything? What happened?"

Hermione shook her head and tucked her arm through his. "I'll tell you later," she whispered.

Ginny swept over to the stairs.

"Now, Ginny—" Mr. Weasley stood up and blocked her way. "It's Christmas."

"Excuse me, Dad."

He shook his head. "No, we're going to give Sirius his er—Christmas gift—" he glanced at Remus, who nodded, "—and you won't want to miss it. Just... just give us a day to take this all in, would you?" He smiled a little. "Your news is incredible, but..."

"It's a bit difficult to process," Bill finished.

Mr. Weasley nodded. "Hermione's quite right—remarkable. Rare. Should have said that straight away—shock, I suppose." He looked apologetic.

"Yes," Mrs. Weasley added faintly, gazing at Ginny. "Shock. Very... very proud, dear."

Ginny's angry expression softened, just barely. "But you don't trust me," she said.

"I don't even know what you're capable of," said Mr. Weasley. "I wouldn't hire anyone for such a big job without first seeing some demonstration of ability—should I treat you differently?"

Ginny opened her mouth, and shut it. She shook her head slowly. "But... once I show you I'm capable, you'll let me try it?"

"We'll see." He put his arms out. "Come on, Ginny-hug your old Dad, all right?"

"All right." Ginny stepped into her father's arms for a hug and shut her eyes. "Thanks, Dad." Her voice was muffled.

"Happy Christmas," Mr. Weasley said, and kissed the top of her head. He sounded slightly choked, and when he let her go, he pushed up his glasses with fingers that shook slightly. "Well then." He looked around. "I'll, er-I'll just ask everyone to pop into the garage for a minute, if that's all right? But Sirius, you stay here, and Remus, you bring him in."

Sirius narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

"Just do what you're told," said Remus, smiling. Everyone filed past them and walked out into the garage. Harry tried to get close to Ginny, but Bill had slung an arm around her and was quietly asking her question after question. She looked much less annoyed now, and gave her mother a long hug when Mrs. Weasley edged Bill out of the way to fuss over her. But when Harry finally caught Ginny's eye she only gave him a hurt look, and glanced away. Hermione shot him a pointed glare, as if to say that he deserved it, and Harry gave up. Apparently he was in trouble, and there was no getting out of it right now. Instead, he focused his attention on the bulky, sheet-draped thing that stood alone in the middle of the cluttered garage. It was wide, waist height, and strangely shaped, with things jutting beneath the sheet at odd angles. A space had been cleared around it.

It was absolutely going to *slay* Sirius.

"Does Sirius know?" Fred whispered to Harry.

Harry shook his head. "Not a clue."

"Excellent," said George.

The family stood in a circle around the strange object. Mr. Weasley grinned at his wife, rubbed his hands together, and stuck his head out the door. "REMUS?" he shouted towards the house. "YOU CAN BRING HIM IN!"

Everyone watched Sirius as he came through the door, suspicion in his expression. "Is this a prank, Moony?"

"It's Christmas," Remus said patiently, coming in behind him and leaning against the doorframe with folded arms. "Would I trick you on Christmas?"

Sirius snorted and looked back at him. "All right, now I *know* it's a prank."

Remus shrugged. "Suit yourself." He gestured to the object in the center of the room. "Open it."

With guarded eyes, Sirius approached the bulky sheet. He frowned at it, looked around at everyone, and tentatively touched it. "This had better not explode," he muttered. In one swift motion, he gripped the sheet and pulled it from the object.

Harry thought his godfather's knees were going to buckle.

"Oh my God." Sirius reached out a shaking hand and touched the shining black motorcycle that stood in front of him. "Oh my God," he repeated, his voice a sheer whisper. He ran light fingers along the handlebar, then withdrew his hand as if he'd burnt it. "Impossible." He laughed, and the sound was strangled. "Seventeen... years... where did you... Remus... how..." He stopped and looked at Mr. Weasley. "She's the same one?" he asked in a trembling voice.

"The very same." Mr. Weasley was pink with pleasure. "She's been in storage at the Misuse office for years—couldn't bring myself to throw her away, always *was* rather fascinated—I was dead glad to have an opportunity to read up on these machines and do a little restoration—my pleasure, honestly. Remus's idea. Everyone did a little of the work, it's taken us a few months to sort everything out but I'm fairly certain she's ready to fly."

Sirius laughed again and seized Mr. Weasley, who looked almost terrified, in a fierce hug. "My bike," he nearly shouted, and let go. He grabbed Remus next. "My bike." He released Remus and went back to touching the motorcycle with reverent hands as if to memorize it all over again. He looked eighteen. His smile was dazzling and the darkness that always hung in his eyes had vanished. Harry was stunned by the difference it made. He looked like the Sirius from his parents' wedding album. "Want to have a go, Harry?" Sirius blinded him with a smile.

"No!" said Mrs. Weasley. "Not until you've tested Arthur's, er—restorations."

Mr. Weasley looked a bit dejected, and so was Harry—flying that thing was going to be a blast.

"Later then, Harry, all right?" Sirius asked, still grinning like a madman. "She's a dream, I'm telling you—no Firebolt 5 can compare. I don't know how to thank you all."

"You could give me tomorrow off," Ron suggested. Harry noticed that Ron's hand rested dangerously low on Hermione's back and that she wasn't complaining; rather, she was looking up at Ron in a way Harry had never seen her do in front of other people. He'd caught her at it once or twice, but never with all the Weasleys watching. He wondered if she'd had something to drink.

"Done," said Sirius. "Tomorrow's yours, Ron." He went back to poring over the motorcycle while

the twins asked questions about it.

"Thanks." Ron slid his hand slightly lower and Hermione's eyes fluttered shut and open again. Harry looked away. They needed to get a room. Ron cleared his throat. "I think I'd like a walk," he announced unnecessarily. His voice sounded strange.

"Me too," said Hermione, sounding just as odd. "Happy Christmas Sirius—and everyone." Most of the Weasleys went on talking excitedly with Sirius as Hermione pulled away from Ron and went for the garage door. She stopped to give Harry a quick hug. "I'm sorry about what happened with the dragons—I'm glad you weren't hurt." She lowered her voice so that no one could hear her but Harry. "Don't be stupid about Ginny, all right?" She patted his back. "Apologize to her. Trust me. Happy Christmas." She nearly ran from the garage, and Ron followed her. Ron's goodbye was much less intelligible; he mumbled something, clipped Harry on the shoulder, and practically ran after Hermione. Harry heard the front door shut.

Ginny stood a few feet back from the motorcycle, and was not engaged in the rest of her family's conversation. She looked pensive. Harry approached her, not sure what to say.

"Sorry," he offered. That had, after all, been Hermione's advice.

Ginny looked at him. "For what?"

"For..." Harry searched himself. "I don't know." He shrugged. "I'm not sure. I just don't want you angry with me."

She rolled her eyes. "Hermione told you to apologize, didn't she? I swear." She sighed, and put out a hand to stop Harry from speaking again. "I'm not having this conversation in front of my whole family," she whispered, and went past him into the house. Harry followed, feeling rather desperate, and a little bit annoyed. He had no idea what to say, and apparently that wasn't going to be good enough. And Ginny didn't seem interested in talking; she didn't stop in the front room, but went directly for the stairs. "Good night," she said.

"Well don't just go to bed!" Harry said, exasperated.

Ginny paused on the steps and looked over the railing at him. "Why not?"

"Because I'm trying to talk to you!" He felt very stupid, and a little bit embarrassed. "I'm not you, you know, I can't just put my hands out and work out what the problem is."

She crossed her arms. "You *know* what the problem is, Harry. You know I just want to help you, and you should have helped me. You know they listen to you. They don't listen to me—I'm a Healer, for goodness' sake, and if that doesn't convince them to stop treating me like a baby then I—"

"No one's treating you like a baby." Harry crossed his arms in retort. "We're *worried* about you. That's different. I don't want you getting hurt."

"I wouldn't *get* hurt."

"Mick is a Species Specialist and he got thrown today."

"And people are going to keep getting thrown if something isn't done about it." Ginny rubbed her eyes. "Look, I'm tired. Max really took it out of me, I need to lie down."

"Okay." Harry shrugged helplessly. "Fine. I'm just going to back to the Notch and go to sleep—but before work tomorrow can we—"

"You can't go back to the Notch tonight, you have to stay here." Ginny's face flushed a little. "You can have Ron's room," she added hastily.

Harry frowned at her. "Why?"

"Erm, because..." Ginny bit her lip and flushed more deeply, and Harry had no idea what was going on. Why was she trying to keep him here all night if she was angry with him? His face warmed up. "Hermione and Ron... you know."

Harry didn't.

"Hermione made me promise to keep you here tonight." Ginny shifted her weight on the steps. "Just don't go home, all right? You'd rather not, I promise."

"But..." Harry stopped. The light switched on in his brain. "Oh." An unwelcome image came into his mind and he pulled a face. "Oh really."

"Yes, so." Ginny was still pink, but a giggle escaped her. "Don't go home."

"No no. I won't." Harry shook his head to get the persistent mental image out of his head. "Ever again."

Ginny laughed outright. "Oh go on, you'll get used to it. There are soundproofing charms to block out the sound of—"

"Ginny!"

She snickered. "What? You want me to help you look some up? Ron used to snore when he was little, he's a really loud sleeper, so I imagine he's an even louder—"

"Stop!" Harry cried, and put his hands over his ears. "No more, seriously!"

Ginny leaned over the banister, still laughing, and pulled his hands away from his head. She held onto them and gave Harry a look full of affection. "You're such an idiot," she sighed, and pushed her fingers through his. She tugged his hands, leading him to walk around the banister and up the stairs towards her. When they were eye to eye on the step, Ginny leaned back against the wall and there was no more room in Harry's brain for Ron or Hermione. There was just Ginny, and the two inches of electric space between them, and his heart pounding in his chest, and his blood thumping in his body. She'd forgiven him. That was what this was. Wasn't it? He watched her mouth and waited for her to say something.

"I'm still angry."

Harry nodded. "Okay," he said, because it seemed important to say something. He remembered he still hadn't given Ginny her gift. He released one of his hands from Ginny's and reached around to pull the wrinkled parcel out of the pocket on the side of his trousers. "Here," he said, handing it to her, "They said you're supposed to have it. I thought it could be useful, or something. I don't really know how it works, but you probably--"

Ginny took the package, which he'd wrapped badly in tissue paper with a bright green bow, and she opened it. "Oh!" she looked genuinely happy. "Harry, you shouldn't have got something so big!"

Harry looked at the little white thing in her hands. That was big?

"I've wanted one of these--a Healing Cloth, isn't it?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I'm glad you could tell that, because I didn't want you to think I'd gotten you a handkerchief. The Dursleys sent me a tissue once for Christmas, and..."

"No, stop." Ginny laughed. "It's perfect. I do need this." She looked down at it and traced the embroidered G with her finger. "It's really lovely... and it was really thoughtful." She glanced at him. Her tongue came out briefly and wet her lips, and Harry forgot about Christmas presents. "You're, erm, staying here tonight?" She bent one leg and touched her knee to his.

Harry nodded again. "Yeah. In, you know. But in Ron's room. Because your parents--well. And you can't..." He stopped as the first fully formed thought he'd had in several minutes came into his brain. He looked down at their touching knees. "Ginny, I'm really not hurting you?"

She grinned. "No."

"How?"

"I don't know, but I... I'm playing a sort of trick on myself. I've been working really hard on just separating my personal emotions from the Empathic ones, and I think I can do it now--mostly. It takes a lot of concentration, but if it means that we..." She spoke in a rush, as if she were embarrassed. "I think I can be with you and nearly turn off the Healing, although it'll be *really* great when I don't have to do that. Twice as great, because that's such a big part of how I feel... everything. But it won't be long, and then I won't have to separate anything, and I'll just be able to be with you in every..." She sounded very nervous. "Erm, in every sense without any sort of..." She blushed. "Barriers. Do you know what I'm saying?"

Harry thought he might. "Yes," he managed.

"Well good."

There were voices in the kitchen. Apparently everyone had finished in the garage; Harry turned to go back down the stairs, but Ginny grabbed his hand. "No, come with me."

"What, upstairs?" Harry felt a rush of fear. Not in Mr. Weasley's house, he wouldn't.

"Just come with me, hurry." Ginny dragged him to the top of the steps just in time. The voices were in the front room now: Remus and Sirius, Fred and George, Bill and Mr. Weasley.

"I can't," said Harry frantically, though he really wanted to. "They'll kill me."

"No one will know. You *can* Disapparate out of my room and into Ron's, if anyone knocks."

Harry stared at her. "That's true," he said, and something hot raced through his body, touching every nerve. Was she really inviting him into her bedroom? In her house? Was this because he'd got her the right present, or something? Harry felt a thrill of wicked excitement, and for the first time he understood what Ron was always saying about Hermione being mental. Ginny was actually insane--but it was great. She was *brilliant*. Harry took a step closer to her. "I can always Disapparate," he repeated, still looking at her mouth.

Ginny nodded. "And it's not as if we're really breaking house rules. I mean, we're obviously not going to, em--do anything tonight--not completely, you know--because it really would be awkward with everyone here and well, you know, I do want to wait until I'm better at being around you and we've--well." She swallowed and looked over his shoulder at the wall.

Harry had never been so flustered. She wanted to wait. So then, she wanted to... at some point... she'd just *said*... An incredible sort of movie began to play in Harry's head, and his brain shorted out. "Obviously," he said absently, and tried to focus over Ginny's shoulder.

He immediately wished he hadn't looked behind her. His eyes flew open and he nearly had a heart attack.

Penelope was standing in the corridor, just beyond Ginny. "Full house tonight," she said evenly.

Ginny jumped, dropped Harry's hand, and her mouth fell open in horror. Harry wanted to sink through the wall at his back and disappear.

Penelope didn't seem to notice their wild embarrassment. "Leo's asleep, so if you both wouldn't mind tiptoeing when you go past his room?"

"I'm not going that way," Harry said, too quickly. "I'm going to the attic, to sleep in Ron's room."

Ginny cringed.

"All right." Penelope smiled at him. "You do that." She tapped Ginny's shoulder and spoke quietly. "I'll just let your mother know, if she asks, that the two of you are fighting it out up here and that I heard you, and I think you'd better be left to sort it out. Shall I?" Her eyes twinkled. "Yes, I think so. Amazing news, Ginny, by the way—I don't know if congratulations is really the right word but, well—congratulations. Goodnight, you both." She waltzed by them and down the stairs.

"Where's Ginny?" Bill's voice floated up towards them, and Harry flattened against the wall. "I wanted to talk to her a bit more."

"She and Harry are having a row," Penelope said calmly.

"Upstairs?" Mrs. Weasley asked archly.

"Yes, I had to ask them to hush for Leo's sake—but it's nothing too horrible. They're better left to work it out, I think." Her answer seemed to satisfy the Weasleys, but it couldn't be too long before one of them came up to check and see if it was true.

"I'd better go up to the attic," Harry whispered. He wasn't sure that his heart had started beating again, and there was a funny sort of buzzing in his ears. Penelope had heard what Ginny had said—she must have heard. People were going to know.

"You'd better *not*," Ginny said. "Come on." She was still pink, but she took his hand again.

"They'll kill me," Harry repeated, but he went with her to the door of her room. Ginny pushed it open and Harry got a glimpse of darkness, a messy bookshelf, moonlight on a pillow and fairy lights that had been magicked around a tiny dressing table mirror. He wasn't sure he'd ever seen Ginny's room before; somehow, though, it looked familiar. "I should, you know, stomp up the stairs really loudly," Harry said, not really sure of what he meant. "So they'll think I've gone to Ron's room."

"If it'd make you feel better," said Ginny seriously. "Go on, I'll wait." She looked soberly into his face for another second, then cracked up laughing and tugged him into her doorway. "Hurry, get in here before they find you and kill you!" She giggled. "Oh Harry, stop looking like that, I'm *joking*. Anyway, if we're caught we can always tell on Ron—that'd distract Mum from anything."

Harry cracked a grin. "Okay."

Ginny smiled back at him, but her smile faded quickly into another sort of look, and Harry felt his grin disappear as his eyes fixed once again on her mouth. Ginny let go of his hand and grabbed him gently by the front of his jumper. She slowly pulled him so close to her that Harry's eyes blurred and he could feel her breath on his skin. "Want to go and stomp up the stairs?" she asked quietly.

"No."

Ginny brushed her mouth against his for a brief second and Harry took a deep breath. "Come on, Harry," she murmured, and began to walk backward into her room. Harry put his hands on her hips to guide her and bent his head to kiss her again—now that he could kiss her for as long as he wanted, he had a feeling he wasn't going to stop. Without another protest, he disappeared into her room and shut the door with his foot. "Happy Christmas," she whispered.

"Happy Christmas."

A/N: We are shocked that one of our "seasonal" chapters is actually seasonally appropriate. We are used to writing Halloween in February.

A/N II: We originally wrote a long sexy scene here, but B Bennett said it was crap, so we won't be posting it. Love, A&Z

A/N III: Shouldn't we be having a celebration of some kind that we made it through half a year? Only six more story months to go! Woohoo! That's 87 in people months.

Thanks, as always, to this chapter's tremendous beta readers, who are: Moey, Elanor Gamgee and Caroline.

Faeryland

"You're going *where*?" Ron snorted with laughter, and plunked down on the end of Harry's bed. "Are you *joking*?"

Harry adjusted his bottle green robes in the mirror.

"Ginny bought you tickets?" Ron leaned back on his elbows and smirked. "You know where I'm taking Hermione this afternoon? The pub. Tonight, we're going to the party. And you're getting dragged to -"

"Shut up, all right?" Harry pulled on his cloak and clasped it. "We're going to the party afterward. Ginny said--"

"Oh, Ginny said?" Ron sniggered. "Letting her boss you around all night, is that it?"

Harry shot him a disgruntled look and went for his wallet. He stuck it in his pocket and tried to think if he needed anything else. Tickets. He grabbed them from his desk and put them in his other pocket. "See you at the party," he said shortly, and pulled his wand.

"Have fun at *Faeryland*," Ron sang out, laughing harder than ever. "Mind you stay away from the actual--"

But Harry had already Disapparated.

* * * * *

"Oh, you can't go today, you have to be here for New Year!" Hermione hovered over Ginny's shoulder, watching her in the mirror and looking very anxious "We have to be together tonight, it's important--can't you go later? Don't you want to see everyone?"

"Yes," said Ginny, and studied her freckles with distaste. "I'll come to the party, Hermione, don't worry. Harry and I will be there before midnight."

Hermione sighed. "It won't be as much fun without you."

"Oh go on, you know everyone, and everyone's going to want to ask you a million questions." Ginny put a little color on her mouth and wondered if she was being too fussy, but it did make her look less pale, and she decided to keep it. She had twisted half her hair back on both sides so that it looked rather like a little crown round her head, and she thought it made a nice effect, but perhaps that was also too fussy. Ginny couldn't decide. She'd never really been *out*, with Harry, and she was beginning to regret having bought the stupid tickets. He probably didn't want to go anyway. And he was going to look at her and think that she was trying too hard. Ginny reached for a tissue, to wipe off the lip-gloss.

"Oh don't take it off, you look pretty," said Hermione. "And leave your hair--no, don't touch it!"

Ginny let her hands fall into her lap. "I'm nervous," she complained, searching Hermione's eyes for comfort. She found it.

"I know. Believe me, I know." Hermione patted Ginny's shoulder. "Though I can't imagine anyone being nervous around Harry."

"Well, I can't imagine anyone getting all worked up about Ron," Ginny retorted, and went to her closet. Harry was going to be there at any minute, and she really needed to finish dressing. She clasped a heavy cloak over her shoulders, and turned to Hermione. "All right?" she asked.

Hermione gave her an almost jealous, admiring look. "Better than all right," she said. "You're lovely, Ginny."

"What are you going to wear, to the party?"

"Oh, just those, erm, white robes I wore home from Cortona." Hermione's color rose; she averted her eyes and fussed with a couple of random objects on the dressing table.

By Arabella. A New Year Outtake of the Fairytale Variety.

Notes: Thanks to Honeychurch, who helped me to plan both the false and the true Faeryland, and Harry's and Ginny's misadventures therein. Thanks also to B Bennett, who chatted with me about the party, and to Zsenya, for the beta.

Disclaimer: Most of my faery lore, though some is imagined, comes from *Faeries*, by Brian Froud and Alan Lee, which is a beautifully illustrated bit of magic.

"The sleeveless ones? You'll freeze."

"We'll be inside," Hermione protested. "Anyway, please make sure you get there by midnight. I know we've never made much of a fuss about New Year, but... I don't know. I feel like this one's important."

Ginny understood. It was important. It would be the first year, since she had gone to Hogwarts, in which Voldemort would not exist. That was worth celebrating together, and she did want to be there, to ring it in with her friends. "It's great of the twins and Lee to throw a party." She grinned. "Can't wait to see how many people turn up. Bet they keep Hogsmeade awake all night."

"Ron said they only invited twenty or thirty people. Oh—and the Chudley Cannons, he said."

Ginny smirked. "Just you wait. If word's got round that my brothers are having a party, the Three Broomsticks'll be packed. Bill and Charlie tried to throw a little party once, while Mum and Dad were on some kind of business visit, out of town." She laughed. "Ottery-St. Catchpole practically overflowed. You've seen those scorch marks on the front room wall, at the Burrow?"

Hermione frowned. "Yes?"

"Mum never could get them out. One of Charlie's friends put them there—you know, I think it might've been Mick O'Malley? But I was only five, all I remember is being carried round on everyone's shoulders all night."

"Ginny?"

Both girls jumped. Harry's voice—just outside the door. Ginny fled to the mirror and checked her reflection. Not too bad.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes!" Ginny was shocked at her voice. It had gone all high-pitched. She cleared her throat and tried it again. "Yes, Harry, be right there." She checked her pockets. Money, identification, map, receipt—yes. She took an apple from her desk and pocketed it, then looked at Hermione. "See you in Hogsmeade."

Hermione smiled, bit her lip, and threw her arms around Ginny. "Have fun!" she whispered, and squeezed.

It was amazing how much she'd missed Hermione without realizing it. It was so good, having a girlfriend. "Thanks," Ginny whispered back. "You too." She opened the door and leaned her hand on the doorknob for support.

Harry's eyes.

"Hi," she whispered, feeling painfully shy.

It took him a moment to answer. "Hi." The two of them stood in the doorway, gazing at each other, until Hermione softly cleared her throat behind Ginny. This seemed to bring Harry to his senses; his eyes flicked over Ginny's shoulder and he nodded. "Hey, Hermione. Right," he returned his eyes to Ginny, "you'll have to go by Floo powder, won't you?"

She nodded, still feeling rather tongue-tied. "You, erm, go on and Apparate," she managed, "and I'll meet you at the gate, all right?"

He frowned. "Don't you want me to come with you?"

"Oh! Well I do—I only meant—you don't have to get all sooty -"

"I don't mind," said Harry, looking a bit flushed as his eyes darted over Ginny's shoulder again. "Er—bye, Hermione."

"Bye, Harry." The laughter in Hermione's voice was obvious, but Ginny didn't turn around to see her face. She followed Harry down the stairs and into the front room, where he gestured her into the fireplace first, steering her by the small of her back. He took the pot of Floo powder down from the mantelpiece and offered it to her.

Impulsively, Ginny leaned out of the fireplace and kissed his cheek. "You're such a gentleman," she said quietly.

Harry grew so hot that she could feel it. "Thanks," he mumbled.

Ginny took a bit of powder and stepped back. "See you there," she said, and dropped the powder at her feet. "Faeryland!" she said distinctly and, in a rush of green flames, the world dissolved and spun.

* * * * *

Harry didn't know what he had expected, but it hadn't been anything so elaborate as this. He and Ginny dusted off at the Floo portal and approached the Faeryland gates, which was a long, tall, shiny stretch of several openings. At each entrance there stood a witch, all dressed identically in long, blue robes, each one wearing little wings on her back. Long lines of people and creatures filed through each entrance—families pushing strollers, little children running, older wizards with

walking sticks, giants who looked to be on holiday—it reminded Harry a bit of the Quidditch World Cup.

"It's so crowded!" he said.

"Yes, it's very popular," Ginny replied. Her face shone and she held her fingertips over her mouth.

"What is it?"

"I'm just excited—I loved this place when Dad brought me. I've always wanted to come back and there just hasn't been a chance -" she gave Harry's cheek another impulsive kiss. "Thanks for coming with me."

"Thanks for the tickets," said Harry, grinning a bit. He wanted to kiss her back, but the lines of people all around them deterred him. Instead, he took the tickets out and gave Ginny's to her. "You're sure you don't want me to pay you back for -"

"They were a present," Ginny said at once.

"But at least for my half -"

Ginny ignored him. "Isn't the castle wonderful! I'd forgot about that." She pointed over the top of the gates and Harry saw the turrets of a spiraling castle in the distance, which crawled with ivy that seemed to be... moving. Harry adjusted his glasses and peered intently at it, and when he thought he knew what he was seeing, he felt a pang of disquiet.

"Are there people in that ivy?"

"No, they're faeries—but not real ones," Ginny said. "It's charmed to look like the damsels of Caerphilly. You know who they are?"

Harry didn't. Ginny explained that they were faeries who turned into ivy when they weren't busy haunting ruined castles—"And we have to go in the castle before we leave. And remind me, I want to get a baby shirt for Leo. Oh, and we have to go on the Red Cap Adventure. That one scared me so much when I was little, I cried and cried and Dad explained to me that none of it was real, but I wouldn't believe him."

"So... none of this is real?" Harry asked, as they approached the front of the line. "There aren't really faeries here?"

"There are a few," said Ginny. "But only little harmless ones. There used to be lots, but you know, Harry, a lot of faeries aren't very nice. This place has been open for centuries, and in the beginning lots of children were eaten by water spirits, and lots of people were pixy-led into the ocean beyond the woods, where they drowned, and in the end they decided to keep the real faeries out of it. So they built this place for the tourists, and the rest of the isle is restricted—faeries only. That's the real faeryland. It's behind Faeryland Park, out in all that wilderness that covers the island, and you're not supposed to go there." She slipped her hand into his. "It's very dangerous."

Harry rubbed his thumb over the back of Ginny's hand and glanced at her face. She was so cute. Dangerous faeries—he wanted to laugh, but her expression was quite serious and so he held it in. "If there aren't any faeries here," he asked, "then what is there?"

"Loads of stuff. Rides and shops and tours and things. Lots of people say it's just for babies, this place, and perhaps it's true, I was a baby last time I was here, but I remember loving it. And everyone's been here, Harry. You have to go at least once. It's a wizard thing." She squeezed his hand, let go, and handed her ticket to the winged witch in blue.

"Welcome to Faeryland!" the witch fairly sang, wearing a smile that was much too big for her face. "No one under seventeen permitted to enter without an adult."

Ginny showed her identification.

"Faeryland is not responsible for lost or stolen items, injuries, memory losses, abductions, or fatalities," the witch continued, and unrolled a bit of parchment under Ginny's nose. "Wand mark here, please."

Ginny touched the signature spot with her wand, and her name appeared in glowing scrawl. Harry watched, glad that Ginny had gone first so that he would know what to do. The winged witch snapped her fingers and the scroll vanished; in its place, a little sack appeared in the air. "Have a pleasant stay in the magic kingdom!"

Ginny took the little sack, and Harry received his own as he passed through the gate. "What's this?" he said, pulling out of the way of the lines of people, so that he could open it.

"Protection," said Ginny, looking into hers. "A bit of salt, a four leaf clover, faery dust, and a ring revealer."

Harry snorted. "That's protection?"

Ginny arched her eyebrows. "Oh yes. Didn't you learn faery defense?—oh no, you wouldn't've, those are second year studies and you had Lockhart." She put a sympathetic hand on his arm. "I had Remus for that bit. What you do is, hang the four-leaf clover round your neck—well, tuck it into

your robes then, don't pull a face! Keep the fairy dust in one pocket and the salt in the other—no, the salt goes in your left pocket, Harry—and wear the ring revealer on whichever finger fits best. Or on your thumb, yes, all right. Now you're ready."

"To do what?" Harry asked, studying his ring revealer with distaste, and imagining what Ron would say if he came to the party wearing a shiny purplish ring on his thumb. He'd have to remember to take it off and chuck it.

"To survive the park," said Ginny, grinning. "Just because they ask the hobgoblins and water powlers to stay out doesn't mean they always do. Now. The salt's for nasty water spirits—toss a bit at them if they get too threatening. It burns them, and they'll let you go. The revealer will get very warm and give off a light if you get too near a faery ring—usually those're marked by circle of mushrooms, but faeries are clever. They've been known to sneak in here and pull up the mushrooms so that humans will walk straight into traps."

"How's a fairy ring a trap?" Harry asked, still frowning at the revealer, which looked girlier by the second.

"Well, if you step into one, you belong to the faeries, and they can keep you as long as they like. Sometimes they get bored in a matter of minutes. But sometimes they take a fancy to a person, and keep them for years and years." Ginny tickled his arm. "They'd keep you Harry, I know it." She smiled at him, and Harry ducked his head. It was great, being looked at like that. He didn't really mind the purple ring. Ginny could take him wherever she wanted.

"And the faery dust?"

"Very useful, although I doubt we'll have to use it in the park. D'you see the patches of grass all over? Just don't step on any of them. Some of them are just grass, but some of them are faery mounds. If you want to know the difference, toss some of the dust onto one. If it's a faery mound, it'll turn gold."

"And if I step on one?"

"You'll vanish and be transported to the real faeryland."

Harry snorted again. "Oh no," he joked.

Ginny shook her head and smiled, a little. "Have respect for the faeries, Harry. They're very, very powerful." She touched the spot on his chest where, beneath his robes, the four-leaf clover hung. "That'll break a faery spell," she said quietly, looking straight into his eyes. Harry got a lovely chill. "If you should find yourself enchanted, just hold it in your palm and repeat, *I am my own, I am not yours, you shall not pixy-lead me.*"

Harry knew he'd never say any such thing, and he forgot the chant at once, but he wished again that there weren't so many people milling around. It would have been so nice to kiss her, right now. She looked so earnest.

"Okay," she said, and slipped her hand into his once more. "What shall we do first—oh, I know. Follow me."

Harry walked with Ginny down the wide, crowded, cobblestone alley that led toward the castle at the heart of Faeryland. He looked around at all the shops, which lined the street and had been made to look like giant cottages. The whole place had a strange, surreal glow; the smells of chocolate, peppermint and apple tart were almost overpowering. It was rather like Hogsmeade only... shinier. Bigger. Not as comfortable or homelike—it didn't feel real. And everywhere, there were witches and wizards in long blue robes, wearing big white nametags, waving and smiling. They were unnerving. Ginny led him into a big shop at the end of the row, and Harry caught his breath.

Perhaps it was girly, but it was beautiful. Harry had never seen flowers like this; they hung on vines from the twenty-foot ceilings, they blossomed, huge and fragrant, from the walls. There were so many colors that he didn't know where to look first.

"Bluebells," said Ginny, pointing. "Don't go near any of those outside, if you see them! Wild thyme—don't bring it into the house. St. John's Wort—that's actually better protection against faeries than the clovers, in some ways. I'll get a stem." She plucked one from a basket. "And here we are..." She tugged him over to a massive trough of posies and scooped a handful. "Primroses. Get some."

"What are we going to do with them?" Harry asked, picking a bunch of flowers for himself, and wondering again just what Ron would say if he could see this.

"Eat them," Ginny said matter-of-factly, and went to the counter to pay. Harry plunked down a Galleon before she could take out her money. "Harry," she protested, but Harry closed his free hand over hers to stop her from digging into her pocket.

"Harry..." the young sales wizard on the other side of the counter repeated faintly. He had stopped putting the primroses into bags, with his eyes frozen on Harry's forehead. "Oh wow..." he breathed. "You're..."

Harry's heart sank. He didn't want to deal with this, but he didn't know what to say.

"Could we get our stuff, please?" Ginny prompted the sales wizard.

"Oh sure, of course!" The boy changed the Galleon without taking his eyes off of Harry's forehead, then stopped midway to handing him his change. "Never mind," he said, sounding flustered. "It's on the house." He put the change back into the drawer and pushed the Galleon across the counter.

"No, really," said Harry. "I'd like to pay."

"No no no," the boy said. "Least I can do—wow, Harry Potter, never thought I'd—wow."

Harry was relieved when Ginny thanked the sales wizard for him, picked up their primroses, and guided him out of the shop. "That's what you get, trying to pay for me," she joked, but her eyes turned serious right away. "Look, if people start to bother you, we'll just leave, all right?" She handed him his primroses. "Just tell me if you're not having fun, and we'll go straight to the party."

"No, it's okay," said Harry, picking up a primrose. "Eat this? Really?"

"Mmhhh," mumbled Ginny, who had already stuffed a few into her mouth. "They sugar them, go on. If you eat primroses, you're far more likely to see the faeries."

"We're wizards," Harry managed through a mouthful of flowers. "We can see all that stuff."

"We're mortals," Ginny replied sagely. "Faeries don't see a difference between Muggles and wizards. They're suspicious of us all, and they camouflage themselves—look, right there!"

Harry whirled and looked into the tree to which Ginny had pointed. Sure enough, the bark of the tree was blinking. A little goblin sat in its branches, almost invisibly, watching them.

"A tree chameleon! Cool, those aren't allowed in here!" Ginny took a few steps closer to it, and the little goblin scrambled higher up on the branch. "It's all right," she said kindly. "Hello there."

The goblin made a frightened, babbling noise at her, and clutched its branch.

"Why do they come here, if they're so afraid of humans?" Harry asked, enthralled. He'd never got over the novelty of magical creatures, and he doubted that he ever would. He was as amazed by them now as he had been when Hagrid had first begun to point them out to him.

"They like our food," said Ginny. "Goblins do, anyway. Full faeries can't eat it. It hurts them." She reached into her pocket and, to Harry's surprise, she pulled out an apple and held it up, seeming not to see the sign beneath the tree, which read: DO NOT FEED THE FAERIES. "Would you like this?" Ginny asked the goblin.

It blinked, then slid a little lower on its branch and held out its hand.

"No, I'm not going to throw it to you—come here and take it."

The little goblin looked torn. It gnawed on the branch for a moment, watching the apple, and then seemed to come to a decision. It leapt to the bottom branch so quickly that Harry took a startled step back, and it tried to snatch the apple from Ginny's hands, but she was too quick for it.

"Nicely, please," she said, laughing, and held the apple up again. "Nicely." The little goblin reached out long, spindly brown fingers and gently plucked the apple from Ginny's hand. It sat on the bottom branch for a minute, rolling the apple between its palms, and then it gave Ginny a fond look and scampered back to the top of the tree. Ginny clapped her hands and turned to Harry, her face alight.

Harry just looked at her. It was another one of those moments—they seemed to be coming every five seconds—when he just wanted a quiet place alone with her. She was beautiful. Even the tree chameleons thought so; another, smaller one had crept across the bottom branch and was reaching out its long, thin fingers to touch her hair.

"Want to go on the boats?" she asked, and stepped away from the tree before the goblin could pet her. It gave a little mew of protest. "And see all the water faeries? Most of them are just reproductions, you know, but there are real Asrais in the underground springs, and they're lovely."

Harry nodded; they threw their empty primrose bags into a bin, and he took her hand. As they stood in the long line that led to the boats, Ginny told him stories about every kind of sprite and naiad. She gave him the gruesome histories of child-eating water monsters and she told him about the time she'd gone visiting one of her uncles in Yorkshire, and had nearly been eaten by a spirit called Jenny Greenteeth. "Fred and George threw me in the river," she said, "and this green hand grabbed me round the ankle. She had the most horrible, slimy green face—Fred beat her in the head with a stick while George pulled me back out. They were so sorry and shaken—I never did tell Mum, but there's a reproduction of her on this ride and oh, when I saw it, didn't I cling to Dad."

Harry let go of her hand and slipped his arm round her waist, trying to tell her silently that she could cling to him, if she liked. She leaned her head on his shoulder, and they waited in contented silence through the rest of the line. Harry was pleased when the ride attendant put them together in their own funny little boat, which required Ginny to settle between his knees and lean back against

him as the boat drifted into a dark, watery channel.

"There it is, on that rock," Ginny whispered, and pulled Harry's arms around her. "That's a Jenny Greenteeth, isn't it horrible?"

It was. It looked like a hag, with stringy hair on a balding head, and green, oily skin. She was more bones than anything else; her nose sank into her skull and her fingers were gnarled and clawed. She hissed at them from between her sharp fangs, and leered with her unnatural eyes.

"Fred and George threw you to that?" Harry whispered, making a mental note to beat them both with a Bludger bat the next time he saw them.

"They didn't know she was in the river. But yes. Oooh, look at the powler, those are scary too."

The powler's head was only halfway above the water; all Harry could see were its eyes, which bulged in a gleaming, murderous way, and the top half of its mouth, which gaped as though it wanted to swallow whatever came near it. Its long, haggish hair swirled around it in the water, and it seemed to be watching their boat pass.

"You're sure they're reproductions?" Harry asked edgily.

"They seem very real, don't they? There's a merrow, isn't it awful? Sort of a cousin to merpeople, but it's also part monster. Dad told me once that Muggles think merpeople are beautiful, is that true, Harry?"

He pulled her closer against him. "I always thought mermaids were supposed to be."

Ginny laughed. "Some are, I've read. But none of the ones in Britain. Oh, the Glaistig though—look at her."

Harry stared. The most beautiful blonde woman he'd ever seen—save the veela—hovered just before them, singing and smiling, wearing a long, flowing green dress that dripped into the water. She reached out for Harry. "Dance with me," she asked, in a low, echoing voice. Harry gaped up at her, but held onto Ginny, and the Glaistig's eyes narrowed. "Dance with me," she said again, but her voice was harder this time, and when she sneered at Ginny, Harry noticed that she had two long, pointed, red-stained fangs.

"She's a goat, under her dress," said Ginny, as their boat sailed through the disturbing illusion. "Not a woman at all. And if you dance with her, she'll suck your blood."

"Yeah, I had a feeling. What's that one?" Harry pointed to a funny looking frog with wings that leapt from one place on the water's surface to another.

"A water leaper. They eat fishermen."

"That one?"

"An Aughisky. They look like horses, and so people get on them, but then they ride into the water and dump their victims, and tear them to bits, and eat their livers."

"Aren't there any—you know—nice water faeries?" Harry asked, bewildered.

Ginny craned her neck and kissed his chin. "Wait until you see the Asraais. They have to live in the deepest part of the cavern, where it's darkest. We're almost there—oh, here comes the drop, hold on, this is the best!"

Their boat suddenly tilted and raced down a long, watery slope, and Harry's stomach plummeted—but it felt good. He held onto Ginny and enjoyed the feeling of lost gravity, and he was sorry when they came to the bottom of the hill. "We have to go on this one again!" he began, but he stopped talking and his mouth hung open when he saw what was happening around them in the pitch black cavern.

From the depths of the dark water, hundreds of streaks of shimmering light shot up, pell-mell, all around them. The streaks of light bent in the air and dove back into the darkness without making splashes. After watching openmouthed for several seconds, Harry realized that the streaks of light were... females. Little ones, no bigger than his hand, but females all the same. They were wingless and bright and longhaired, shooting out of the water with their toes pointed, their pretty faces upturned, and their hands stretched over their heads, toward the high cavern roof.

Harry reached out to touch one, and realized with sudden embarrassment that they didn't have any clothes on. He retracted his hand.

"If you capture one," Ginny whispered. "Or expose it to sunlight, it'll melt away into a puddle of water, and die." She relaxed against him and sighed. "Aren't they beautiful? These ones are my favorites. And they're real."

They were beautiful. Harry watched them, rapt, until the boat passed through the dark cavern and began to climb a watery hill, leaving the Asraais behind. He craned his neck to watch them until they had entirely disappeared, and when he turned to face forward again, he gave a yelp of fear. Suspended at the top of the hill was the ugliest creature Harry had ever seen—a massive beast with one flaming eye and arms so long that, although the creature was twenty feet tall and its head

touched the roof of the channel, its clawed hands dangled low enough to trail in the water. Worst of all, it didn't seem to have any skin holding it together; it was a raw mass of black blood, wet muscles and nasty yellow veins.

"What's that thing?" he finally managed.

"The Nuckelavee," said Ginny. "Not a real one. If it were, it would eat you."

"No kidding." Harry shut his eyes when the boat sailed between the Nuckelavee's bloody legs and back out into the fading sunlight. The noise of Faeryland Park crowded his ears and he looked around, realizing that he'd missed his chance. He'd had Ginny in the dark, by herself, and he had been too caught up with faeries to take advantage of their privacy. She climbed out of the boat, and he immediately missed the pressure of her against him. "Can we do that one again?" he asked, glancing at her mouth. "I-liked the hill."

She bit her lips and smiled at him, and nodded.

The line went much more quickly the second time, which Ginny explained was because the families with children tended to leave the park at around five or six, which was why it was best to go at night. Harry listened to her talk, never taking his gaze off her. Every time she caught his eyes, he got another lovely chill, and he was pleased to see her blush, when he refused to look away.

"What is it, Harry?" she asked quietly, keeping her eyes on her hands.

He didn't answer, nor did he turn around when he heard people mutter his name behind him. "Harry Potter, you say?" "That's what the boy said in the shop." "Thought he had a job with dragons." "Seems he's taken the day off." "Isn't that the Minister's girl with him?" "Mm, yes, I saw that issue of *Charmed Life*."

They ignored all of it, climbed back into a little boat, and had barely disappeared into the cavern before Harry had his mouth on Ginny's cheek, and then her neck. She made a needful sound and twisted towards him to rest her forearms on his chest. She tilted up her chin.

Harry didn't even open his eyes for the Asrais. The ride went much too quickly. They emerged from the tunnel, breathless and tousled, and Harry was glad to see that the sky was nearly dark. "What now?" he asked, lazily strumming Ginny's stomach with his fingers and hating it again, when she got up and left the boat. She gave him her hand and helped pull him out.

"Red Cap Adventure. I want to see if it's really scary, or if I was just easily scared, at seven."

The Red Cap Adventure, it turned out, was not at all frightening. Real Red Caps, Harry knew, used human blood as dye, when they could, and were in actuality very unsettling creatures. But the Red Cap reproductions in the ride were so poorly made and unthreatening that Harry spent most of the ride laughing out loud at their sad attempts to scare him. "This made you cry?" he asked Ginny, tickling her side.

"I was seven," she protested, but she was laughing too.

The Red Cap Adventure was followed by the Pixy's Flight, which Harry liked very much as it had mostly to do with flying around in the sky—they went on that one three times, and came off it feeling dizzy.

"I'm hungry," Ginny declared, holding her stomach. "And lightheaded."

So was Harry, and they quickly found a restaurant that offered such overpriced delicacies as Faery Nectar, which Harry pointed out tasted suspiciously like pumpkin juice—"Shut up, Harry, I'll have you know that it is Faery Nectar."

They ignored—at least Harry tried to ignore—the fact that more and more people seemed to have realized that he was there. Many tables around them had gone unnaturally still and were watching him and Ginny, and whispering.

"Do you want to leave, Harry?" Ginny asked quietly.

"No."

They ordered regular hamburgers and a dessert of Sprite Cakes, which had sugar wings poking up out of them as if to suggest that little faeries had been baked inside. "That's disgusting," said Harry, but he ate it in two bites, and walked out sucking on one of the wings, happy to get away from the whispering people. "Let's do the boats again."

Ginny laced her fingers into his. "We can, before we leave. But I want to take you into the haunted castle." She took him to stand in another line. "This one's all the haunting and trickster faeries. Banshees and will o'the wisps and things. It's good and scary—especially the last bit."

Harry laughed. "Scary like the Red Cap Adventure?" he teased, and got an elbow in the side.

"Laugh while you can, Harry Potter," she said, and a few people turned around and stared at them. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she whispered, and squeezed his hand. "I'll remember not to do that in public."

"It's all right," said Harry, shifting uncomfortably. "I think word already got around, or some-

thing.”

“Yes.” Ginny sighed. “You’re sure you want to stay?”

He nodded. “I like it.”

She gave him such a brilliant smile that Harry knew he’d endure all the whispering and staring in the world, for another one. “I’m glad,” she said. “I hoped you wouldn’t think it was stupid. Ron thinks this place is ridiculous, and I worried—I don’t know. That you’d think it’s too girly.”

“Not at all,” Harry lied, spying a cart that twinkled with fairy lights and appeared to be selling Butterbeer. He checked the line; it was still very long. “Hey, I’m going to grab a Butterbeer—do you want one?”

Ginny nodded and tried to reach into her pocket again. He rolled his eyes at her and took off for the cart before she could try to hand him any money. He was too intent to notice that the ring on his thumb had gone quite warm, or that it glowed bright purple. He didn’t think to toss any faery dust onto the patch of grass that stood between him and the Butterbeer cart. His foot hit it and Harry felt a jerk in his whole body, as if every pore had been suddenly filled with sharp, clean magic. He looked down in panic, but it was too late.

Faeryland disappeared.

* * * * *

Ginny was so anxious to have Harry back at her side again that she noticed very quickly that he was missing. She had rounded two bends in the slowly moving line, and it shouldn’t have taken him so long to get a Butterbeer—she craned her neck and tried to see where he was, but though she could still see the cart, twinkling merrily, she could not see Harry anywhere. Perhaps he had run to the toilet. She waited as long as she thought that would take, trying hard not to get worried. But she had never grown used to waiting for Harry to come back, and she didn’t like it when she didn’t know where he was. After ten minutes had passed, she ditched the line to ask the man at the cart if he’d seen anyone of Harry’s description.

She never made it to the cart. Halfway there, her ring revealer burnt into her middle finger, stopping her in her tracks. Her eyes fell on the patch of grass that stood not three feet from the Butterbeer cart, and her heart dropped into her stomach.

“That’s bad,” she muttered, and dug into her pocket for faery dust. She threw it on the grass, and when it glowed gold, her heart sank further. “Oh, Harry, you idiot...” He had no idea how to manage faeries. Not that she did. She looked around the park one last time, to be sure that Harry wasn’t just wandering about, but his messy hair was nowhere in sight—and Ginny had a very strong sense that he had gone into that faery mound. She dodged around it, to the Butterbeer cart.

“Excuse me,” she said breathlessly to the man inside. “But did you see a man with black hair and glasses -”

“Looking for Harry Potter?” The Butterbeer man grinned. “Park’s buzzing about him today. Nope, haven’t seen him—not in person, anyway.”

“He didn’t—he wasn’t standing on that patch of grass right there?”

The Butterbeer man frowned. “Is that a faery mound?”

“Yes—wait, what do you mean, you haven’t seen him in person?”

“Well, I found this next to the grass, just a minute ago.” The Butterbeer man held up a wallet and opened it. Harry’s identification half-smiled out at her, and Ginny’s stomach did a nasty somersault.

“Damn it,” she muttered. So he *had* been taken.

“Say... aren’t you that Minister’s daughter?”

But Ginny had left the cart. She’d run back to the patch of grass. She threw back her shoulders, drew a deep breath, and before she could think too hard about what she was getting herself into, she stepped on the faery mound.

She was whisked out of Faeryland Park at once and when the world reappeared around her it was a much darker world, lit only by a soft, ghostly glow and a silvery-purple mist. The woods around her felt alive; Ginny shivered with something like ecstasy. The real faeryland. It was dangerous—she knew it—and it was stupid to come here. But it felt like nothing Ginny had ever sensed, and the part of her that was a Healer opened up instinctively and allowed the magic to rush in and claim her. She stood soaking in the woods for a long minute, forgetting Harry.

Harry. Concentrate. Faery magic was clever. Ginny shook her head to clear it of the enchantments and peered into the brightest part of the mist, from which she could hear voices like soft bells, chiming in the night. She must be near a ring. Perhaps they’d carried Harry there. She approached the bright place with incredible quiet, her heart pounding. Faeries could be beautiful, but they could be equally vicious, and she should not have been here. Her stomach gave a nasty

thud when she recognized the thicket of flowers at her feet.

A bluebell wood. Treacherous. Almost every human to trespass in a bluebell wood had been eaten by the faeries, and those who were not killed were kept as mortal treasures. Ginny could only think of one story in which a human had escaped alive from a bluebell wood, and that had been a Muggle woman in the seventeenth century, who had stumbled into a faery circle and been absorbed into that magic world. She had, somehow, come back from her adventure, and claimed that she had been given healing powers and clairvoyance. The other Muggles had put her in prison for what they called her lies. The Muggles had starved her, but the faeries had brought her food and, after her release, they had watched over her for the rest of her days.

But she was the only one. Ginny fingered the St. John's Wort in her pocket and the clover around her neck, and wondered what use the paltry charms would be against faery magic. A voice in her gut told her to get rid of her charms here, before the faeries sensed them. She emptied her pockets of salt and dust, buried the charms and her Faeryland ticket stub in the soil, under a rock, and went forth again towards the light with open hands and racing blood. She had to find Harry.

The fairie ring, when she came upon it, filled a vast glade and was more beautiful than anything she could have imagined. The outside edges seemed to shimmer, and within it, faeries of all sorts fluttered and lounged—male and female, naked and clothed, royal and peasant, winged and not. There were faery children no higher than Ginny's knee, and faery maidens as tall as Ginny herself. There were tiny faeries the length of her hand, and there were fully formed men and women, regularly proportioned, who only came to her hip. There were no trolls or goblins here; these were faeries of the purest and highest order, ethereal and slim, deceptive in their delicate beauty. These were faeries capable of tremendous magic.

In the center of the ring, they had Harry.

It took all Ginny's strength not to call out to him, but she knew that she would have no bargaining power if the faeries knew what she really wanted. He couldn't see her anyway; his glasses had been taken; he sat helplessly in the midst of a horde of girl faeries, holding his broken clover in his hand. He looked half-drugged, and Ginny suspected that they'd given him something to drink. Or perhaps he was half drunk with pleasure—the faery girls certainly seemed taken with him. They had gone about draping him with thyme and cowslips, which would have been funny if they hadn't been naked. Glad, at the moment, that Harry was missing his glasses, Ginny narrowed her eyes and steeled herself.

"Hello," she said softly, from outside the circle.

A hush fell over the ring. Every face turned towards her and thousands of ancient eyes in breathtakingly youthful faces stared at her with curiosity. Apprehension.

Laughter.

Ginny knew her hands were shaking, but she did her best to appear calm. It wouldn't do to let them see her fear. Not even now that one of them, a handsome man in splendid robes made from leaves and blossoms, rose from what looked like a half-sized throne and came toward her. He was only as tall as her waist, but Ginny knew better than to underestimate his power. She braced her mind, determined not to fall under any enchantments, as the faery male studied her.

"Not faery..." he said quietly, in a voice like water. "No... and not human..." He met her eyes with his piercing black ones. "You come without charms. Without protections—a wand you have, but it will not help you here..." He had lifted his hands in a manner much like Ginny's own, when she was Healing, and slowly moved them through the air before Ginny's center. After awhile, he nodded, and his hands fell to his sides. "So young, you are. Tell me, female child, what brings you to our faery ring?"

Ginny let her instincts lead her, and her instincts told her not even to look at Harry. Not yet. "I have come to see you," she said softly. "To know you."

The faery gazed up at her. "What are you? Witch?"

"Witch and Healer." Ginny knew, from the changed expression of respect in the faery's eyes, that she had given the appropriate information.

He nodded. "Step into the ring."

Ginny smiled a little. She wasn't completely stupid. "I have no wish to intrude," she said, "only to observe. Tell me, what have I interrupted?"

The faery gestured to the center of the ring, to Harry.

"Oh..." Ginny pretended to see him for the first time. "You have a mortal. Is he human?"

"Wizard." The faery smiled. "Powerful, young and strong. We sensed him. He was in the Park with the false things, where he did not belong, and we have brought him here."

Ginny nodded calmly, though it was very, very hard. One of the faery girls had taken to kissing

Harry's hair as she wove pansies into it and spoke love charms over him. "How long has he been here?"

"Moments only." The faery looked well pleased with his latest acquisition. "He will be very useful, and we will give him forgetfulness."

"Of his old life?"

"Of his suffering." The faery's mouth grew grim. "He has fought. We know of the battles in the world of men. They are written on his life and in his memory. But we can help him. We can lift the past and cause him to know nothing but pleasure here, while we extend his mortal life. He has a deserving soul."

Ginny couldn't have agreed more, and she had to admit, in a deep part of herself, that what the faeries wanted to offer Harry was, all things considered, not a bad deal. "And what can he do for you?"

"Sire babies," said the faery, matter-of-factly. "The blood is thinning here, but what runs through his veins is powerful magic, and mixed with the blood of our females..."

Ginny gritted her teeth. "Yes, I see."

"I believe we may be able to extend his life five hundred years."

"How fortunate he is."

"Yes." The faery looked up at her with new intent. "Your blood is much like his. Old and powerful and full of rare magic."

"Yes." Ginny tore her eyes away from Harry, whose hands were being played with by faery girls on either side of him. He wasn't going to be siring any babies for anyone. They could just stuff it.

"Step into the ring," said the faery, very softly, gazing up at Ginny. "You are looking at a king of faeries, girl child. I welcome you here."

Ginny thought he was a bit short, for her tastes, and she wasn't going to get into that ring. "I thank you for the honor," she said carefully, beating her brain for what to do. If she didn't enter the circle, she might very well be attacked by the magical creatures that dwelled in the woods. If she did, she had the distinct impression that she would be kept and used, as they intended to use Harry. A happy life, perhaps. But it wouldn't be *their* life.

"You do not wish to join us?" said the faery king. "I can make you like us... you have some immortal strengths. I could extend your life -" The faery king abruptly stopped speaking and looked left. He made a sound of discontent, and Ginny followed his eyes.

A little boy. A faery boy, not as tall as the king's waist and barely higher than Ginny's knee, had crept up to the edge of the ring and was trying to dart out of it without being seen. When he knew the king had caught him, the little boy froze at the ring's edge, his wings shivering, and shifted his gaze to Ginny's face. She felt a pang of terrible longing and pain come from him, and wondered what the matter was.

"Our youngest prince," the king said sadly. "Ruined."

Ginny couldn't help herself; she had already moved towards the boy. "What is it?" she asked dropping into a crouch. The tiny boy reached his hand out for Ginny, and she glanced back at the faery king. "Am I allowed to touch him?"

The king's eyes were dark. "It does not matter. He wandered to the false Park many days ago, where mortal children fed him mortal food. It pulled him into their realm, and he is now half theirs, half ours, unable to thrive in either world."

The little boy stretched his hand closer to Ginny, who took it. He wrapped his hand around her fingers and sighed so contentedly that she wasn't sure what to make of it.

"He suffers from a craving for mortal things. It has happened among us before."

"What will happen to him?" Ginny asked anxiously, looking at his tense, childish face. She held up her open palm and the little boy leaned against her forearm, throwing his arms around it. She felt his relief, and along with it, she felt a coursing sorrow, of something precious that had been stolen from him.

"He will lose his power, little by little, and drain away. He cannot die, being immortal, but he can waste into shadow."

"Oh no." But the little boy's sweet, handsome face was touched with terrible anguish, and Ginny knew that what the king was saying was the truth. "How old is he?"

"In mortal years? Eight. He is only an infant, here."

Ginny nodded. "May I have your permission to help him?" she asked.

The king looked startled. "Help him, mortal? A prince of faeries? Witch and Healer you may be, but your magic is nothing, in comparison with ours, and nothing we have done has mended him."

"Perhaps," Ginny said slowly, "you can't help him because his problem lies in my world. I may

be of some use." She sat on the ground and the faery prince crawled into her lap; he sat on her leg and leaned back against her. She glanced at the king. "Let me try?"

The king nodded, but looked extremely uncomfortable. Many of the fairies in the ring behind him had stopped in their revels to approach the edge of the ring and watch this unheard of interaction. Ginny tried to ignore their watchful eyes. She tried to ignore the singing of the girl faeries whose attentions to Harry grew ever more ardent. She cradled the boy prince in one arm and gently placed her fingers over his heart.

The energy that filled Ginny was of a level she had never yet experienced and she knew that, if this had been an older faery in her arms, its magic might have killed her. As it was, his infant power was only enough to shake her to her bones. She shut her eyes and reeled, feeling the immensity of his magic and his strange, immortal soul that seemed to have no conscience in it. She felt destiny and leadership in him, and royal privilege. It was massive, all of it, and Ginny barely kept herself conscious while it rocketed through her, along with the pain. The confusion and the pain.

He'd tasted mortality and could not live without it. But he had to. Ginny felt that there was an open corner of his mind that was not meant to be open. It tortured him. She moved her fingers from his heart to his head and laid her palm on his hair. The little boy sighed, and Ginny opened her swimming eyes and tried to focus down on him. He blinked up at her with silver eyes and watched her face.

"Let me have it," she said softly.

The boy's body clenched and he shook his head.

"Let it go."

He twisted, in her arms, and tried to run away; Ginny struggled to hold onto him, aware that the other faeries were watching with narrowed eyes, probably ready to rescue their prince from her amateur hands if she should take too much longer. She held him tight and opened up as far as her spirit would let her, allowing her presence to unfold around him.

The boy's struggles grew less vehement. Finally, he went still.

"I can take it from you," she said quietly, looking straight into his eyes. "That horrible pain right there." Ginny pressed her index fingertip to the faery prince's temple and he relaxed, a little. "But you have to want to give it to me, before I can take it away."

His breathing was ragged. She could tell that he wanted to keep the new part of himself, that it had made him curious to the point of ruining his health and that he didn't want to forget the little taste of mortality that he'd been given. But it was like faeryland, for her. It wasn't meant to be a part of his existence.

"It's not for you," she whispered, repeatedly smoothing her hand over his hair and watching his face go slack. "You'll be happier without it. Let it go."

The little boy gave a slight moan, and slumped in the crook of her arm. His head tilted back.

"That's it. Let me have it. Let me take it." Ginny relaxed and felt a sharp, dark curiosity stab into her. It hurt, and she felt tears prick at her eyes. The pain ebbed through her chest and down into her legs, and she knew that whatever she'd just done, it had probably taken a year or two off her life.

The little prince lay still in her arms for a moment, and then his eyes flew open. He registered her face, and the feeling of her; at once he pushed away from her body and fled into the mists of the faery ring. Ginny watched him go with an aching heart, even though she knew that it was for the best. He was truly faery again, if he would run from her like that. She'd managed it.

She was exhausted, and found that, when she tried to get to her feet, she had a very hard time. When the faery king extended his hand to help her stand, she forgot who he was, and took it, realizing her mistake almost at once. But, to her surprise, he did not try to lead her into the ring. He simply stayed on his side of it and supported her from where he was.

"Thank you," she mumbled, and her eyes strayed to Harry, who was lying on his back, nearly hidden by the glade's long grasses. Around him were too many girls. But Ginny was too tired to think about it much, and her eyes went back to the faery king, whose expression took her by surprise.

His eyes were suspiciously bright. "Thank *you*, mortal," he said softly, and released her hand. Ginny realized that, all around him, the other faeries had gathered and were watching her with gracious respect. None of their eyes were laughing anymore, or narrowed in distrust. "Will you not join us? Stay with us, stay with me. You belong here, you are something more than witch."

Ginny laughed a little. "You are very kind."

"No then." The faery king gazed at her. "A great pity. But can we give you something in return?"

This was it. Ginny opened her mouth and shut it. Her eyes strayed back to Harry, who was

almost completely eclipsed by faery girls and flowers. "I... have no wish to deprive you of your new mortal," she said. "But there is something... about him..."

"Deprive us?" The faery king laughed. "He is nothing. Take him. We offer him to you." He gestured to the center of the ring and Harry rose into the air. As Ginny watched, he was borne towards her until he hovered just before her. His glasses had been put back on, but he was completely delirious, and, aside from having been clad in reeds and bluebells, he had enormous daisies stuck behind both ears.

"I like him," Ginny declared. "I'll take him."

The king nodded and Harry's body left the ring. He stood beside her, and gave her a blank look.

"Hi."

"Hello, mortal," said Ginny, biting her lips not to laugh in relief and amusement. She turned her attention back to the faery king. "How do I return to my world, from here?"

"Walk directly away from this ring and you will pass out of faeryland. A sprite will turn the path as you go, to make it straight." He held up his hand in a strange salute. "Come back to us, mortal faery. Know that you have sanctuary here."

The honor wasn't lost on Ginny, but she was too relieved to say much. She bowed her head to the king, took Harry's hand, and walked straight out of the woods with him by her side.

* * * * *

Music and lights. Harry played with the hand that held his, and stared around the room, not sure how he'd got there. Ginny had told him to get into the fireplace, and she had told him what to say. Something about a broomstick. There had barely been room to stumble out of the fireplace; there had to be three hundred people here, shouting and dancing around. Were they faeries? He reached out to touch one.

"Harry!"

He'd touched someone familiar. She had no wings, but a lot of brown hair. Hermione.

"Hey." He grinned at her, feeling really great. "What's going on?"

"Where *were* you?" she exclaimed. "It's midnight! You were supposed to be here for the countdown and the chimes and the—oh, never mind, give me a hug, Harry. Happy New Year."

"Is it?" He patted her head with both hands.

Hermione pulled back and eyed him narrowly. "Have you been drinking already? Well then you might as well go and talk to Ron, he's drunk himself into a state, waiting for you to get here. Hi, Ginny." Hermione tried to hug Ginny, but Harry held onto her and wouldn't let her go.

"No," he said, keeping Ginny very close.

"Sorry," Ginny muttered. "I'll explain later—we got... delayed."

"Is he drunk?"

"Sort of."

"I'm not drunk," Harry said, and immediately lost his balance. "Wow." Something green dangled in his face; he plucked it off and examined it. "Pretty."

"Why are there... bluebells and daisies all over his head, Ginny?"

"Are there?" Harry reached up and felt them. "Hey."

"Don't ask," Ginny said shortly, and started brushing vines off his trousers. "Don't ask—is George kissing Meg Castellwild?"

"Since the clock struck midnight."

"That's new!"

Harry kept his arms tight around Ginny while she talked, and he began to look around the room. Everything was fuzzy. Blurred. Faces he knew and didn't know, lots of people in Gryffindor scarves—Gryffindor. Harry smiled from ear to ear and laid his cheek on Ginny's shoulder. These were great people, making all this noise. Harry focused in on the most familiar face of all, and kept grinning.

"No, Neville, just let me say." Ron had his hands on Neville Longbottom's shoulders and had hunkered down to look him drunkenly in the face. "You're like, a genius."

"No I'm not," Neville pointed out.

"Yes you *are*. You're a plants *genius*. And you know I always wished I could be more like you, in Herbology? You're brilliant, Neville. You're brilliant."

Ginny laughed. "What's he doing?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "He's been doing this all night," she said, and giggled. "You should have heard him with Colin and Eloise, he was practically in tears on the floor, thanking them—no,

you should have heard him with the *Cannons*. Oh lord."

"You're great, Neville, I mean it -" Ron had engulfed Neville in a hug and was rocking him back and forth. Neville's eyes, which Harry could barely see peeking over Ron's shoulder, were round and terrified. When Ron let him go, he fled to the bar.

Ron rounded on Hermione. "You're beautiful," he said.

"So you keep telling me," said Hermione dryly, but Harry was getting his brain back in order, and he could tell she was extremely pleased. "Give Ginny the treatment, then."

Ron grabbed Ginny's shoulders, and Ginny began to laugh. "I love you, Ginny," he said seriously. "You're the best sister."

"You're pissed," Ginny told him, and patted his head.

"I'm not!" Ron roared. "You're the best, Ginny, you're the best. I should tell you that more often." He pulled her away from Harry and into a massive hug, then caught sight of Harry and seemed to choke up. "Harry."

Harry blinked. He had the strange feeling that Ron was about to launch himself at him, and he didn't know if that was good. All around him, hundreds of people were dancing and sloshing drinks around—he didn't need to have a major emotional moment just now—or ever. But he was too addled to get away before Ron pounced.

"Harry," Ron said hoarsely, gripping Harry's shoulders. "You're—you're the best mate a bloke ever had. I mean it." He opened his mouth to say something else, but whatever it was, it caught in his throat. His eyes filled with tears. "I mean it," he rasped, and threw his arms around Harry. Much to Harry's horror, Ron gave a great sob. To his further horror, he felt like he was going to sob back. He couldn't remember all that had happened tonight, but he had a feeling he was lucky to be here, and he knew he was lucky to have friends like this. Ron pounded his back and gave another sob.

"Oh, Harry!" came a high pitched voice from over Ron's shoulder. Harry managed to peek around Ron, and saw Fred Weasley standing there, with his hands clasped over his heart. "Harry, we love you!" he cried, and flung himself onto the two of them, clapping them both on their backs.

George attacked from the right, a second later. "You've got such pretty green eyes," he wailed.

Ginny and Hermione burst out laughing; Ginny grabbed Harry around the back and Hermione grabbed Ron.

"Everyone come and give Harry Potter a hug!" Fred shouted, above the din.

Harry wasn't sure how he kept breathing. The room pressed in around him as every person he'd known at Hogwarts, who had survived the war, threw themselves onto the pile with a mighty roar. From the center of the pile, Ron thrust his fist into the air. "To Harry Potter!" he shouted, his voice breaking. "He might have giant daisies on his head, but he's a real man! To Harry Potter!"

"To Harry Potter!" the room shouted back, their voices echoing in Harry's ears. He had a feeling that, on any other night, he would have been mortified by all this attention. Tonight though, he just gave in. It was great. They were great. This was the best New Year ever. A world of his fellows squeezed in around him, shrieking and spilling Butterbeer into his hair, and then Harry felt a mouth on his. Hands on his robes. He opened his eyes and was relieved to see Ginny in front of him; he pulled her close and kissed her back, for once not worried about it being in public.

"Happy New Year," she gasped.

"Happy New Year." He put his hands in her hair and stared at her face. He had a sudden memory of her, standing far away through a haze of purple mist and doing something remarkable. But he couldn't remember what it was. "Ginny... what happened at..." he began, but she shook her head.

"Here," she said, and handed him his wallet as everyone else went back to their own enjoyment of the party. "It was a real hassle getting this back, when you wouldn't say what your name was, let me tell you." She kissed him again. "And all you need to know about tonight is, the faeries gave you to *me*." She hugged him tight. "You're *mine*."

Harry hugged her back. "We never got to go on those boats again," he said wistfully. "We'll have to go back."

To his surprise, Ginny turned up her face and gave a howl of laughter. "I don't think so, Harry," she said. "Not for a long, long time." She snickered, and gazed at him. "You really don't remember what happened?"

Harry tried. He thought back. But it was all a haze of... pleasure. Beautiful woods. A nice, ticklish feeling. "No," he decided. "I don't."

She smiled at him, looking rather relieved. "Good, Harry," she said, and pulled something out from behind his ear. She showed it to him, and Harry was a little embarrassed to realize that he did indeed have giant daisies on his head. "Good." Ginny tucked it behind her own ear and turned up her face to kiss him, and Harry stopped trying to remember anything else. Everything he wanted to

know about New Year's Eve was happening right now.

— CHAPTER THIRTY —

Under the Influence

Bill Weasley usually liked Mondays. It meant a new week, new things to learn, and new adventures. But this Monday, when he woke up, he could see it was grey and rainy outside, which meant he was still in London, and not in Egypt.

“Shut it,” he growled to his alarm clock, which had just started to blast news from the WWN. It stopped with a whine and Bill rolled over. Too many days not working made Bill a lazy boy. It was easy to get into the routine of doing nothing, which was why he usually tried to keep as busy as possible.

Pulling his blankets higher, Bill was about to roll over and wait for the alarm to go off again, when he remembered that Charlie had probably only just arrived home from his shift at Azkaban. It was best not to wake him, especially since they had a Ministry meeting later that afternoon.

Shivering, but too bleary-eyed to find a dressing gown, Bill quickly tiptoed across his room and into the hallway towards the bathroom. A moment later, he was hopping around the hallway on one foot, biting back a yelp. Mick, who had essentially moved out of their flat and in with his *wife* over the holidays, had piled all of his remaining boxes in the corridor and Bill had forgotten to remember that they were there. Bill was pretty sure that these boxes contained everything that Mick didn’t want Rose to find out about, and he entertained himself for a moment trying to imagine the Secretary Privy and former Head Girl Rose Brown floating to the ceiling in her green and silver Slytherin school robes. *That* amused him, and he excused the boxes and headed in to shower.

Over breakfast, Bill opened *Empathy in Sorcery, A Complete History and Guide* and began to read. If his youngest sibling and only sister was really a Healer, then he wanted to refresh his memory. He had to stop every few minutes, take a bite of toast, and shake his head. He was having a hard enough time believing that Ginny was grown up, let alone that she was in possession of powers that might very well make her the most sought-after witch of her generation. And he wasn’t too sure about Harry, either. Sure, he was Ron’s best friend, and the hero who had defeated and destroyed Voldemort, but when the *Charmed Life* photograph flashed into his head, Bill felt a definite sense of dislike for the boy. He still didn’t know whether or not the snippet of conversation he’d overheard at Christmas dinner had anything to do with Ginny’s Healing powers, or something else, but he did know that he’d be keeping an eye on Harry, and if he saw anything out of the ordinary, he couldn’t be held responsible for a wayward hex or two.

Bill had been right not to want to wake up this morning. Gringotts was even more boring than usual today. Since the completion of the security spell reconstruction at Gringotts, Bill’s position there had been tenuous. He had only agreed to stay in London to help his father, who seemed to take comfort in going over the various news and concerns of the Minister of Magic with his son over lunch. A few times they’d even ventured into Muggle London—Arthur Weasley’s fascination with Muggles had not decreased in the slightest—and even in his current position, he had legitimate reasons for the interactions. Arthur had spent a large portion of the meeting with the Muggle Prime Minister staring at the television set and waxing philosophical about how there was no difference, really, between Muggles and wizarding folk—the Muggles had developed their own magic, and it was quite amazing... The Prime Minister, equally as fascinated with them, had seemed quite disappointed when Bill had told him no, his earring did not ward off evil spirits, and yes, his boots *were* made of alligator skin (they may have had to keep relations with select Muggle officials, but there was still quite a lot that Muggles were better off not knowing).

Bill seemed to be spending more of his time assisting his father in an unofficial capacity, and less time doing anything of use at Gringotts. The goblins were now using him to try to break the charms on vaults for new accounts. It was boring, mind-numbing work, which consisted of one hour’s worth of spell-breaking and then seven hour’s worth of report writing, explaining why *he* was able to break the security charms, but others probably might find it more difficult.

And it didn't help that for every ten minutes of boredom at work, he seemed to have a hundred thoughts of Fleur Delacour, who was, he knew, now working at Hogwarts. He'd overheard Ron's classmate Neville Longbottom telling someone else on New Year's Eve that life at Hogwarts wasn't so lonely since Fleur had arrived to help. She was helping to restore the wards and charms that had protected Hogwarts so well over the centuries. Bill had felt a strong sense of relief at the news, and told himself that it was only because she was such a skilled charmer and that meant that Hogwarts would be safe again.

Mick had been very helpful in explaining the biology and history of veela to Bill. Of course, it had taken several days for them to actually have their talk, as Mick had been busy with work and, as it later turned out, Rose. Bill had started to read the books he'd purchased at Flourish and Blotts anyway, but the contents had been so shocking that he'd tossed them aside several times, only to pick them up and try again.

"Most of those books were written by people who actually fell under a veela's spell," Mick had explained, trying to calm him down. "They're biased."

"This one," Bill said, holding up Veela ~ The Definitive Guide to the Undefinable Goddess, "was written by a woman."

Mick laughed. "Yeah, right. That woman spent years trying to bottle veela sweat to turn it into love charms. That's why she knows so much."

"So their sweat doesn't have the power to knock a man over?" Bill asked. He'd noticed that Fleur always seemed to smell lovely, but maybe that was just part of the enchantment.

"Great Merlin, man!" Mick had found this very amusing. "It depends on how often she bathes, of course. Anyway, your bird is only a quarter-veela, right?"

"She's not my bir-woman, whatever," he'd started to protest, but he hadn't really been in the mood.

Mick had ignored him anyway. "Quarter-veela," he explained, "are three-quarters human. Full veela can reproduce in two ways—by laying eggs, or by giving birth, like a human. The babies that are born by the eggs are full veela and the babies that are born like us are half-veela. Making any sense?"

Bill shook his head. "None at all. What determines how the baby is born? Do they just wake up and say 'I don't feel quite like laying an egg today...'"

"No... it depends on how they mate..."

"How many ways are there?"

"Well..." Mick looked like he wanted to laugh. "If they mate with a bird, then they lay an egg. If they mate with a human, then they give birth to a half-veela human."

"Mate with a what?"

"A bird. Veela are essentially shape-shifters. Oh, but don't worry though—they make sure everything fits before they, er, mate."

"So what does that mean?" None of this answered Bill's questions about the charm of a quarter-veela and whether she might be stronger than a love charm. "Can a quarter-veela shift shapes and all that stuff?"

"Why do you want to know?" asked Mick. "You're a human."

Bill reached for his copy of Women with Wings (And Beaks and Claws, so Watch It) and started to flip through the pages. Mick grabbed it away from him.

"Rubbish," Mick muttered, under his breath. "Quarter-veela have some power," he explained "They can turn the charm on and off, and occasionally, when extremely angry or upset, can even sprout the wings—" He paused and winked. "Ever see that happen before?"

Impatient, Bill asked the question that none of the books had answered. "Can a quarter-veela break through a Love Charm repellent?" he asked. Mick looked surprised.

"Nah," he said, dismissively. "They're not really that powerful. Perhaps on young boys, but otherwise, their charm is short-lived. A full veela will suck you in and bewitch you. All a quarter-veela can do is make you stare for a few minutes. There are no lasting effects, and certainly not enough power to break through even a weak Love Charm repellent. Don't tell me you...well I guess it couldn't do you a whole lot of harm, but... a bit paranoid, aren't we Bill?"

Bill hadn't answered. There had been a sinking feeling in his stomach that had continued to plague him on a daily basis, especially while at Gringotts. He'd been stupid and wrong and mistaken, and it had been killing him not to know Fleur's whereabouts. Now that he knew she was at Hogwarts, he spent his time wondering if he should go there, and if he did, would she speak to him, and besides, hadn't he ruined everything?

"Weasley!" There was a knock at his door, and Bill quickly charmed the three-dimensional floating puzzle he was trying to solve into his desk and headed for the door.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"You know who this is, Weasley," barked a familiar, gruff goblin voice. "We are waiting for your report on vault 2877. If the locks are secure, the owners would like to start filling the vault first thing tomorrow morning."

Bill opened the door and smiled down at Barknap. "How do I know it's you? ID, please." After about the third month of Gringotts staff in London pretending not to know who he was, Bill had started to demand identification in return. The goblins seemed annoyed, but it gave Bill a small amount of satisfaction.

"This looks in order," said Bill, handing the identification card back to Barknap. However, just as the goblin opened his mouth to speak again, however, Bill brandished his wand and cast a Revealing Charm.

When the blue sparks and smoke had cleared, an irate goblin pushed past Bill into his office, and made a grab for the finished report on his desk.

"How long has this been complete?" Barknap asked, shaking the roll of parchment.

"Just rolled it and sealed it now," answered Bill. "You'll see that there are still a few weak spots behind the hinges. Someone will have to go back and work on that."

"You'll do it now, with Holgrip," said Barknap sternly.

Bill shook his head and grabbed for his cloak. "No can do," he answered, stepping through the doorway and motioning for Barknap to leave as well. "Got a meeting with the Minister."

Thinking that he could actually finally understand why people abused power when they had it, Bill headed over to the Ministry complex, and hoped that this wasn't going to be a very long meeting.

* * * * *

When he arrived at his father's office, Bill could tell that his wishes had not been granted. Rose Brown was already there, looking, Bill noted, very pretty, despite the fact that she kept running her fingers through her hair and pulling at large clumps of it, all the while talking in a business-like tone to Arthur.

"What's all this about hair?" Bill asked as his father waved him into the room. "Yours looks very nice today, Dad."

Rose cracked a smile, but continued in a serious voice. "We were discussing the hair charms for the orphans in Knockturn Alley and at St. Mungo's," she explained. "The Thinker in Cortona sent us a big package this morning, and it was full of wonderful advice."

Bill nodded at her to continue.

"She's written a spell for us to use to track them. That way, we can quickly find the ones that leave the orphanage, *and* we should be able to discover where they're hiding out in Knockturn Alley soon enough."

"How are you going to do that?" asked Bill. "Surround them with some sort of ward?"

Arthur patted his own bald head. "Hair. Something all children have, and homeless children have in abundance. Charm their hair."

"Is it a difficult charm to carry out?"

"It's written here," said Rose, handing him the letter. "It will be simple for the M.L.E.S. officers to perform it, even from a considerable distance. We've already tested the alert system. As long as the children don't cut their hair by themselves, it should work beautifully."

Remembering his mother complaining the day before that all seven of her children combined had never been as much trouble as Max, Bill smiled at his father.

"Mind if I test this at the Burrow this evening?"

Erupting into laughter, Arthur nodded. "We've already done Max, but you'd better go over there anyway," he said. "Your mother decided that Max needed to start having lessons today. Remus offered to help, but your mum told him he'd better spend all of his time with Ginny, so he sent books over with Hermione this morning."

"Is Hermione going to teach him, then?"

"No, I don't think she's got much patience for it, truth be told. Max asked her first thing if she knew a good spell for 'staying awake during really boring lessons' and she looked properly shocked."

"Speaking of Ms. Granger," interrupted Rose, sounding impatient. Bill knew she could barely stand it when Ministry meetings veered off topic.

"Ah yes," said Arthur, craning his neck to see the clock on the wall. "Where is everyone else? We're waiting on Sirius and Charlie. They're late."

Rose snorted. Bill grinned; she and Charlie still had a lot to work out. Charlie hadn't quite forgiven Mick for falling in love so quickly and running off with a Slytherin. Although Charlie was usually late, Bill wouldn't have been surprised if his brother was now showing up late on purpose.

"Sorry! Sorry..." Sirius and Charlie rushed into the room, both looking damp, yet energized. Sirius' fingernails were extremely dirty. "Just had to find a place to put the bike," explained Sirius. "I told Charlie I'd give him a lift over here. It's my fault we're late."

"Working okay then, Sirius?" asked Arthur, looking at Sirius' grease-stained hands. "Is something wrong with it?"

"No, no... well, the Invisibility Booster you installed seems to be interfering with the braking mechanism, that's all. I've got it all worked out now. No problem." Sirius looked about twelve.

Rose cleared her throat again. This time Charlie snorted. Rose ignored him.

"We were just getting ready to talk about Ms. Granger," said Rose, reaching for Delia's letter and enlarging it. "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" she said, and the parchment hung in the air in front of them.

"We received this letter from Delia Tsikarous, the Thinker at Cortona."

"Thanks, Rose," Arthur said. "Let's look over this letter."

Dear Minister Weasley:

I take quill to parchment today to recommend to you my apprentice Hermione Granger. I know that you are acquainted with her natural talents and abilities. She has not completed an apprenticeship with me, and is not currently qualified as a "Thinker". She is, however, an immensely talented and worthy young woman.

During her time with me, I performed several tests to try to gauge Ms. Granger's abilities. You are well-acquainted with my ineffectiveness in the arena of containment, or, imprisonment charms. Ms. Granger, I believe, does not have such a problem, and may be of use to you with that particular work.

I am always happy to be of assistance.

Regards,

Delia Tsikarous

Cortona

"Well," said Arthur, when they'd all finished reading, "I think that about settles it. We'll draft a letter to Hermione and ask her to start working with Penelope immediately."

"How soon do you think it will take them to come up with a solution?" asked Sirius. "The situation at Culparrat is—"

Arthur waved his hand. "Don't worry, Sirius," he said. "It will all come together."

Rose spoke next, her voice trembling a bit. "He's right to be impatient, Minister. The situation at Azkaban is growing worse, not better. That recent incident with the dragons—well, you've seen the letter that we received from Mr. Malfoy."

Bill knew that Malfoy wasn't the one that Rose was worried about. To his surprise, Charlie jumped to Rose's defense. "Something is wrong with the dragons," he said, simply. "They act irrational like this when they've got colds, or a viral infection, but we can't seem to find anything wrong with them. Mick has been working every day since Christmas with Viking, and he's flown fine, with no problem, or sign of illness. I can't see anything wrong with them either. But the way they acted on Christmas... the way Krum's dragon acted a few weeks ago. My dragon's been fine so far, and so has Cho's, thank goodness, but..."

Charlie stopped speaking; he'd gone red in the face.

But Sirius was standing now, and began pacing the room. "I'm not too happy about the way Norbert has been acting either. And call it conditioning, but when things tend to go off near Harry, it always puts me on guard, and not just because he's my godson. Voldemort may be gone, but we don't necessarily know that all of his supporters are in Culparrat."

"A person couldn't do that to the dragons," said Charlie. "Dragons are amazing, powerful creatures. The only real weakness, besides their eyes, is their long-term memory. Training them to accept riders takes months and months of intense, one-on-one training along with a large team of keepers for backup. You have to use them, or else they forget pretty quickly. Someone couldn't just come along and command them to act jittery for a few hours."

"Maybe not someone," said Sirius, a suspicious glint in his eye. "What about something? Like a charm?"

"If we knew of a charm that powerful," said Charlie, sounding as if this was a silly question, "then we wouldn't need dragons at all. We'd just be able to destroy Azkaban altogether. You do know it takes twenty keepers just to *stun* a dragon."

Sirius shrugged and continued to pace, muttering, "The real problem isn't the dragons—it's the Dementors. Why don't we focus on finding a way to destroy *them*, rather than worrying about the health of something that's only a temporary solution."

Charlie looked like he wanted to say something, but then thought better of it.

It was one of those moments when Bill thought Sirius looked particularly frightening, but his father seemed unaffected and began to speak.

"I should report on this Peeping System that Penelope and Miss Chang were working on—it's taking longer than we thought. It went up just after the incident at Christmas, and it works, but we're not sure that the floor plans we have of Azkaban are complete. Moody's got some of the Aurors at Culparrat scheduled to be at the new monitoring station at Azkaban twenty-four hours a day, but that's not keeping the Dementors inside the castle. All we've learned is that they seem to skulk about and try to get outside the boundaries. They're certainly not destroying each other, although they do seem—" Arthur shuffled through some pieces of parchment on his desk, and rubbed his eyes. "- to be 'depressed' and 'lacking in motivation' on some days, and, it says in this report, they seem to sleep most of the day, from about six in the morning until about four at night, although they tend to be more restless on weekends."

"It's possible to talk to Dementors, isn't it?" asked Bill. "I mean, if you know their language?"

"We've tried," answered Arthur. "They won't talk to us at all. They're focused on getting out of that castle. It's as though they've gone crazy."

"*Gone crazy?*" said Sirius, color rising in his face. "They've *always* been crazy. They *eat* souls. They always have. If you want evidence, just stop by the PDST ward at St. Mungo's and try to talk to some of the soulless shells that are hanging about there. They *must* be stopped."

Rose was rocking back and forth on her feet, and looked very much like she had something to say.

"What is it, Rose?" prompted Bill. He smiled at her. Maybe if he tried to be kind, Charlie would follow suit. Besides, Mick had been extremely helpful to Bill in recent months.

"I've had another letter," she blurted, but then seemed to regain her composure. "It's about the dragons. Someone has volunteered her services."

"Well, who is it?" asked Sirius, stopping his pacing, and leaning heavily against the wall by the fireplace.

Rose pulled a roll of parchment from her robes and cleared her throat:

Dear Secretary Privy Brown:

It has come to my attention that there have been several recent incidents regarding the dragons that are in place to keep the Dementors at Azkaban. Aside from the fact that the dragon-riding schedule is very intense and taking its toll on the riders, the dragons themselves seem to be having unexplainable problems.

I think I might be able to help. You might find this difficult to believe, but I have recently discovered that I am a Healer—"

Bill groaned loudly. She'd done it. Ginny had actually written the letter. He should have known.

"NO way," Bill said.

"Why not?" asked Rose.

"Look," said Bill, trying to think of a good reason. 'She's my little sister and I can remember when she was a baby' didn't seem like one he wanted to speak out loud.

"The thing is," he faltered. "You see, I mean, she's not even out of school! She can't even Apparate yet. What if a dragon lunges at her and she can't defend herself? Can't you just, I don't know, hire more riders?"

"We *have*," said Charlie and Rose together. Both looked a bit disconcerted, and Rose motioned for Charlie to continue.

"There are three riders in training. But the dragons that they're training with are still in need of a lot of conditioning, and frankly, the riders aren't very good. I don't know how many of them will even make it through the training. And we've always said that this is a *temporary* solution. Sirius is right, we need to be working on a way to destroy the Dementors."

Bill looked over to his father, who still hadn't spoken. He looked torn. He was muttering under his breath and shaking his head, and appeared to be doodling on the Azkaban report.

"Charlie," said Arthur, finally, not looking up. "If we decide to let your sister help to try and work out what's wrong with the dragons, how might you be able to protect her?"

Bill gaped at his father, surprised.

"Well I'm not going to let her fly up to Norbert and look up his nose or anything like that!" said

Charlie, as if this were obvious. Bill felt a small amount of relief. Charlie *was* mad when it came to his dragons, and Bill didn't feel comfortable assuming anything. "She'll be on the ground, outside the enclosure. Dragons have very powerful auras—isn't that what Healers do? Read auras and things like that? She should be able to do whatever she needs to do with her feet on the ground. It seems a perfect solution to me."

"And you would accompany her at all times?" Arthur lifted his head and looked at Charlie. His eyes were very shiny, and he seemed lost.

Before Charlie could answer, Bill turned to address Sirius. "You're probably the only one here who's seen Ginny working on a daily basis. How does she do it? How is she when she makes the Wolfsbane Potion every month? Does she get tired? Healers are supposed to be ultra-sensitive to any pain or illness around them. How does she manage to be around *you*—" he pointed at Sirius, "—without passing out every day? Has she ever passed out? In the beginning, it's very common for a Healer to have very severe and physically *dangerous* reactions to people in pain—"

"Been reading much, Bill?" teased Charlie.

"No, he's right to be concerned," said Sirius. "She's not allowed to open up around myself or Remus. He's been working with her since the beginning to try to get her to learn how and when to turn her powers off and on. She's fairly good at managing it around everyone except for Harry."

Bill felt instantly ashamed for thinking badly about Harry.

"Sir," said Rose, addressing Arthur. "I've heard wonderful things about your daughter. I know she's young, and if these were normal times, then I would say that there would be no need for a seventeen-year-old girl to be hanging around Azkaban, but these are not normal times. The war is over, yes, but things won't ever really return to normal until people feel safe again." She paused, and Arthur put down his quill and spread his hands out on his desk.

"I suppose it's the right thing to do, Rose," he said, slowly. "Of course the Ministry wants to do what's best."

"If it's any consolation, sir," said Rose, blushing, "I can tell you that I had the opportunity to ride on Viking during my last inspection. Accompanied, of course. It's frightening, yes, but in truth, I wasn't afraid. The dragon riders and keepers at Azkaban really are the best, and I know that if your daughter is supervised constantly by Mr. Weasley or Mr. O'Malley, no harm can come to her."

Charlie looked stunned. Bill was about to point out that Ginny wouldn't be so safe with Mick if Viking threw his entire harness again, but his father spoke first.

"All right, then. I'll draft a letter."

Bill let out a sound of exasperation. "Is this meeting over?" he asked. Arthur nodded, and Bill headed for the door. It was a wonder that any of them had made it to adulthood in one piece, he thought, as he Disapparated.

When Bill arrived at the Burrow, it was oddly quiet. There were several books and some parchment spread out across the large kitchen table. Bill leaned in closer to see what Max had been studying and was surprised to see that the writing was advanced for a twelve-year-old boy.

Bill could hear no movement throughout the house, although something simmered in a small cauldron over the fire. He peered in, expecting to see a Weasley stew, but instead, the contents were orange and appeared to have something brown floating along the top. Recoiling in disgust, he headed towards the front room to see if he could find his mother.

She was sitting in his dad's big chair, feet propped up, eyes closed. Bill cleared his throat, but she didn't open her eyes. "Arthur," she said. "There's some corned beef in the kitchen, if you'd like a sandwich—"

"It's me, Mum," said Bill, wondering if his mother had been hexed. He'd never seen her so sedate. "Dad's still at the Ministry." Perhaps *now* would be the best time to tell his mother about Ginny.

Molly Weasley opened her eyes. "Bill, dear," she said. "You can have some of the corned beef, too. Just save some for your father."

"Mum, are you okay? Where is everyone?"

"Penelope is still at work," said Molly, counting on her fingers. "Leo is upstairs, sleeping, *finally*. Your father is at the Ministry. And Max is out in the garden, cooling off."

"Cooling off?" asked Bill, wondering if his mother had lost her mind. "How long has he been out there? *Freezing* is more like it. It's January, Mum!"

"Max," said Molly, looking fierce, "cannot be trusted with a wand. That is going to make it a bit difficult to give him lessons in practical magic, but until he learns how to respect his elders, he's going to have limited lessons."

"What happened?" asked Bill, wondering how his mother could look so tired. *He'd* never been any trouble, but she'd raised Fred and George, hadn't she? How bad could Max be?

"He's already mastered Levitation charms, so I thought I'd try to teach him some basic Transfiguration. He was very well behaved all morning, and I thought he was actually interested in turning those buttons into beetles, when all of a sudden, he pointed his wand at me and tried to freeze me! Luckily, he's only twelve—and he only managed to make my leg fall asleep—"

"Mum!" said Bill, shocked. "That's terrible."

Molly just nodded, and continued talking. "So I took away his wand and decided to try Potions instead. I think he thought that he'd be done for the day after that little stunt, but I'm not going to let him off the hook that easy. I needed some heat fertilizer for some of the plants in the garden, and since that's easy, I made him start with that."

"Was that the disgusting stuff in the cauldron?"

"Yes, and he did it all perfectly—"

"It's *supposed* to look like that?"

His mother gave him a look that told him he'd better stop interrupting.

"Yes, it's supposed to look like that. It looks repulsive, which should discourage willful young boys from drinking it."

"He drank *that*?"

His mother sighed. "Yes. And he's fine, except that it's too warm for him inside at the moment. I gave him an antidote, but it's going to take another hour to finish working. In the meantime, he's sitting still, thinking about horrible things to do next, no doubt."

"Mum," began Bill, gently. "You know, he can go back to St. Mungo's if this is all too much—"

"Not on your life, Bill Weasley!" Molly's cheeks were red. She wagged a finger at him. "That boy must have had a horrible life to make him that way. I can't imagine what his parents were like—but he's learned that behavior. He's a rotten, obviously spoiled, willful boy." She laughed. "But I've definitely enjoyed having someone young in the house again. He's not going anywhere. "

"You sure, Mum?"

"I'm sure," she said. "Now, why don't you let me rest a bit more—go outside and get acquainted with Max. Try to find out more about him. Don't let him inside before seven."

Bill headed out to the garden. Max was sitting on a stone bench near the house. He didn't move when Bill sat down next to him.

"Hi," said Bill.

"Could you *move*?" asked Max, not looking at him. "I'm hot."

"*You* move," said Bill, trying not to get annoyed.

"Can't. The dragon lady sealed my bum to this bench."

Stifling a laugh, Bill moved down just a bit. "Watch it," he warned. "She's my mum, and a bloody good one, too. She wouldn't have done that if you hadn't given her a good reason."

It was very nearly dark outside, and the torch by the kitchen door lit up, causing Max to start. Bill shivered and pulled his cloak tighter. He didn't have the benefit of some disgusting potion coursing through his veins. The bench was cold. He watched as several garden gnomes climbed out of their mounds and began to creep towards the Weasleys' winter vegetables.

"Ever throw a gnome?" asked Bill, standing and drawing his wand.

Max looked up at him and threw back his head. "Where I come from, we didn't have garden gnomes."

Was the kid going to tell him where he was from? Bill knew that Ron had done some research and had been unable to find evidence of anyone named Max at the orphanage. They all had a strong suspicion that Max was lying about his first name and the whole family had been tasked to try to coax it out of him.

"Where's that, then?" asked Bill, making no move to undo the spell that bound Max to the bench.

"France," said Max, with confidence. "I'm from France."

"Oui?" said Bill. "Et ou en France?"

Narrowing his eyes, Max shrugged and said, "I don't like to talk about it. It's too awful. Show some sensitivity, why don't you?"

Bill might have believed him, if not for the last line. Instead, he said, "Your English is very good—there's no trace of an accent."

"Yeah, well," Max seemed not to have considered this little problem. "We came on a lot of holidays here. We were here when they had... the accident."

This was going to be a good story. Part of Bill wondered if it wasn't a bit unkind to let the boy carry on like this, but any information might be useful, so Bill sat back down again.

"Accident?" Bill asked, trying to sound very shocked. "I'm sorry. What happened?"

Max looked annoyed. "I said I don't want to talk about it." He made a motion to kick Bill, but couldn't reach.

"Alright, alright," said Bill, holding up his hands. "I was only asking. Why'd you try to freeze up Mum this morning, anyway? This is a great house. I can't imagine that living on the streets of Diagon Alley would be a better situation."

"My friends are there," said Max. "There's nothing to do here."

"You have friends?" joked Bill. "You're a prat."

"Not around them, I'm not. Only when I'm around old men with girly earrings."

"Girls like the earring," answered Bill, tugging at it. "Except for Mum. You should get one."

"I bet Ella would think it's disgusting," answered Max. "Besides, where's your girl, then? Ron's got a pretty one, and he's years younger than you are."

Bill knew he was treading a thin line. He desperately wanted to know more about Max's friends, but wasn't sure how far to push. Looking at Max's hunched form on the bench, Bill felt an overwhelming urge to protect the boy. He was only a kid, and he'd lost his parents, and now, impoverished as it was, the life he'd started to build for himself. He thought of Fleur, and her younger sister who would never have any chance at a decent life. He couldn't do anything for Fleur's sister, but he knew he could do something for Max.

"Perhaps," he said, slowly, hoping his mother wouldn't kill him. "Perhaps you'd be happier if some of your friends came to stay here as well."

At that moment, Molly's voice called to them from the door. "You can probably come in, now, boys. Arthur's home, and we can all have supper together."

Remembering that his father had yet to tell his mother about the decision to let Ginny work with the dragons, Bill wondered if it wouldn't be better to stay outside. "It might be better if we didn't go in just yet," he said to Max. "My dad's got some news for my mum. How about we throw a few of these gnomes and work up an appetite? Then we can talk a bit more about our options."

Max nodded, and Bill turned to address his mother.

"I think he needs another half an hour, Mum. I still can't get too close to him. You go ahead, and we'll eat later."

"All right, dear." There was concern in Molly's voice. "But don't stay out too long, or both of you will catch your death." The kitchen door creaked shut.

"*Finite Incantatum*," said Bill, pointing his wand at Max so that he was free to leave the bench. Max stood and stamped his feet on the ground a few times.

"Thanks," he said. Then, as they headed towards the nearest gnome hole, he said, "Do you really think—"

"Max," said Bill, reaching down to grab two gnomes by their ankles. He handed one to Max, who took hold of it expertly. "Mum would never turn down an opportunity to have more help in the garden." He hurled his gnome over the hedge, and Max followed suit with an impressive toss.

"Not bad for a Frenchman," said Bill.

* * * * *

Hermione was silent. It was the first time—Ron was almost positive—that a visit to St. Mungo's hadn't left her in tears. Her eyes had stayed dry at the hospital while she'd tucked her parents into their beds and touched their hair and told them a little bit more about Cortona. She had even whispered something to her mother before leaving the room for the corridor, where she had turned to Ron with a bit of a grin on her face. "If Mum *can* hear me," she'd said, "then she knows all about us. But I don't think I'll tell Dad just yet..."

Her amusement hadn't lasted, though. They had Apparated home for dinner and she hadn't wanted any; now they sat in the cold, on the steps of the Notch. Ron kept an arm around her while she stared at the sky. The sun was gone now, and Ron was freezing, but he worked not to shiver. She didn't want to go inside. She didn't feel good, she'd said, and she needed air.

She rubbed his knee. "You're really cold, aren't you?"

"Nah." He ran his hand briskly up and down her arm. "Bet you are, though."

She shrugged. "I can't feel it."

Ron winced. He hated hearing her like this; she sounded helpless and flat. Like she'd given up hope. "I know," he said, and gave her hair a kiss. "I know."

She didn't turn to him, but she shivered hard, and Ron knew it had nothing to do with him, or with the weather. "Thanks for leaving work early. I don't know why I had to see them right then, but I did, and I couldn't have gone by myself." She paused. "They're wasting away," she said faintly.

"No they're not." Ron stroked her arm and kissed her hair again. "They won't."

"They are."

And they were. It had been two years this Christmas, and there was only so much that magic could do to keep them in shape and healthy, apart from their madness. The Grangers looked all right to him, but he had visited them several times while Hermione had been away, and their decline had been more gradual in his eyes. To Hermione the difference was harsh and horrible. *They look like strangers*, she'd sobbed on their Christmas visit. *I don't even know them.*

Hermione leaned on Ron's knee with her hand and stood up. She walked through the garden and into the road.

"Where're you going?"

"I need a walk. I know you're cold, you don't have to come."

"Would you *rather* be alone?"

She stopped and looked at him, and, for the first time all day, her chin trembled. "No," she said.

Ron was at her side in a heartbeat with his arm around her again. "Want to walk to the village? The fairy lights are all still up. Looks a bit like Hogsmeade, and I like it—and I think the bookshop's open until eight or nine, so we can warm up in there if we need to."

"Okay."

They walked in silence for awhile.

"It really is cold," Hermione pointed out as they reached the village square. "I missed England, but I bet I lose my tan in two weeks." She snorted and shook her head. "What a shallow thing to think about."

"No it isn't," Ron said honestly. "Don't laugh, but I spent most of Percy's memorial service staring at the back of Dad's head and thinking about what I'm going to look like bald."

Hermione laughed, freely and clearly, and the sound made Ron's heart beat faster. "Did you really?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Well then I feel better." She laid her head against his shoulder. "And you know, I've always heard baldness is a trait carried on the mother's side."

"Good."

They approached the bookshop and Hermione made a little noise of disappointment. "It's closed."

"Family on holiday until 15th January," Ron read aloud from the sign in the door. "Well... the Snout's Fair's right around the corner. We could say hi to Goldie and have a Butterbeer before we go back—unless you'd rather not be in a crowd."

Hermione smiled up at him. "You're sweet," she said quietly, and Ron beamed. He loved getting it right. "And actually I'd really like a Butterbeer." Her teeth chattered. "I missed Butterbeer."

He steered her around the snowy corner at once, and into the pub. It was wonderfully warm and cheerfully lit, and full of the usual rowdy patrons.

"Red!" yelled Lipsett from the corner. "Two more Extras over here!"

Ron rolled his eyes.

"Hey, Ron!" called Jimmy MacMillan, from the far end of the bar, where he was hard at work. "Good to see you—and *hey*, Hermione!" Jimmy gave her a glance that was a little friendlier than it should have been, but Ron didn't have to worry about it. The blonde girl that Jimmy had used to come in with was sitting at the end of the bar; she smacked him with the bar towel and Jimmy turned back to her at once.

"Vell!" Goldie Becker grinned widely, his gold tooth flashing. He hurried to the end of the bar that was closest to the door. "Dis is a nice surprise! Sit down, sit down, let me pour you a drink."

"Hi, Goldie," Ron returned, grinning back. He led Hermione to the bar and the two of them settled on stools. "It's been awhile."

"Yes." Goldie crossed his arms. "I haff been vonderink if you perhaps live somevere else now." His voice was gruff, but he smiled warmly at them both. "And hello, my dear girl. Vot vould you like?"

"Oh, just a Butterbeer. Hi, Goldie." Hermione smiled at him. "Ron practically *is* living somewhere else, you know," she said, a touch of unconcealed pride in her voice as she took her Butterbeer. "He's always in London."

Ron went warm with pleasure and put his hand on Hermione's leg, under the bar.

"Dis is vot I am hearing on de vireless, yes. Young Ron Veesley, reforming de justice department and taking over Diagon Alley."

Ron ducked his head. "I'm just helping Sirius Black—he's doing all the reforms with my dad."

"You are being too modest," Goldie said lightly, replacing two glasses on the shelf below the bar.

"Isn't he?" He nodded to Hermione.

She flashed Ron a smile that made his heart knock, placed her hand on his own and beamed at Goldie. "Yes he is," she said simply.

Since Hermione had come back, Ron had been having the time of his life. He watched her as she chatted with Goldie and pointed to a bottle further down the bar. She unfastened her cloak and placed it on the stool beside her, allowing her hair to fall all over her shoulders. She was home. She was still his—though he understood less than ever how that was possible—and she had returned with a calm in her face that Ron had never seen there before. Every day that they were together, even though their time was short, she grew more and more relaxed with him. He almost didn't know her, and yet she was still Hermione, all the way down to her bones. In everything she did, she was more than he expected—and that was really saying something. It was totally intoxicating.

"I'd love to," she was saying easily. "Which ones are rare, though?"

"Take your pick, my dear." Goldie flourished a hand at the myriad bottles that shone against the mirror right behind him—the import section.

Hermione pointed, and Goldie raised his eyebrows at her. "What, why not?" she asked. "Is that a bad one?"

Goldie laughed. "Votch and see." He put two small glasses on the bar and handed Ron a very familiar bottle.

"Liquid Curse?" Ron said doubtfully. He looked at Hermione. "Are you sure you want to drink this? It's really strong stuff."

Hermione shrugged. "Have *you* had it?"

Ron shrugged. "Well, yes, but—"

"Then I'll try it." Hermione took the bottle out of his hands and poured herself a perfect shot of the light green liquor.

"Very good hand," Goldie praised. He gestured to Ron. "De first time young Veasley tried to pour at dis bar, he spilled a little bit."

Hermione smirked. "Well there, you see, Ron? I'll be fine."

Ron shook his head, unconvinced. "You've only ever had Butterbeer."

"I've had wine."

"When have you?"

"In France."

"When you were *twelve*."

Hermione let out an impatient breath and Ron suppressed a grin. She was looking like Hermione again. The hopeless weight had gone out of her eyes; they flashed warningly at him. He liked her this way, he liked to break her calm and make her fight him. He didn't know why—he'd never know why. He didn't care.

"Ron, I've drunk enough strange potions by now, I'm sure this won't be anything at all."

Now Ron grinned. He knew that it most certainly would be something. "Go on then," he said. "Let's see it."

Hermione tossed her head, picked up the shot glass, and, to Ron's great amusement, took a sip from it as though it was a teacup. She sputtered and her eyes began to water—putting down the shot glass as if it were on fire, she began to flutter her fingers by her mouth.

Ron shouted with laughter. "Is that how it's done? Should I be taking notes?" He poured himself a shot and threw it back as though it were nothing but water. "Of course, there's always *that* way of doing it," he pointed out, after he had swallowed and exhaled. "But I'm sure your way is better."

Hermione looked daggers at him and Ron was excited to see what she'd do next. He knew from long experience that she wouldn't be able to let it sit. It was really something to see Hermione throw back her shoulders, pick up the shot glass again, and toss its contents down her throat. She must have been exercising some of the self-control she had learned with the Thinker, because she neither shuddered nor grimaced. Calmly, she lifted the bottle again.

"Well," she said mildly, with a shrug of indifference, "that was all right, I suppose." She poured herself another shot. "Just an acquired taste."

Goldie nodded and his eyes twinkled at both of them. "Vell, Ron, I see dat you are nicely taken care of," he said.

Hermione grinned, and lifted her glass again. "Yes, he is," she said, and swallowed the second shot without a moment's hesitation. She slapped the glass on the bar and lifted the bottle a third time.

"All right, all right," Ron said, half-admiring and half-embarrassed at Goldie's commentary. "You've shown me. That's enough, Hermione—give me the bottle."

It was the wrong thing to say, and Ron knew it at once from the way Hermione stiffened. Goldie certainly seemed to know it; he whistled low under his breath and took two steps down the bar, to work with another customer.

"Excuse me," Hermione said, cocking her head as though she hadn't quite heard him correctly. "That's *enough*?"

Ron paused a moment, contemplating the situation. Why was there always a point, in every exciting contest, where he took a wrong turn? He had never been able to see when his false step was coming and he hadn't seen it this time—there would have to be a fight before this was over. And at all costs, especially when things had been going so well lately, Ron wanted to avoid a real fight. After a long moment of thought, he took a deep breath, hunched down, and looked Hermione in the eye.

"You said you were only going to drink two, so I just thought—"

"That you'd be in charge of cutting me off?" she asked, her tone deceptively light.

"Now wait, *you're* the one who said—"

"Ron, I know what I said, I haven't lost my memory. I can't even feel this—" she looked at the bottle disdainfully—"whatever it is." She poured herself another shot with a perfectly steady hand, lifted the glass and stopped. "Goldie?" she called out suddenly.

Ron knew this voice. There was a challenge coming.

"Yes, my dear," Goldie said, eyeing Ron with amusement as he approached Hermione. "Vot is it you are needing?"

"Tell me something." She pushed her hair back with one hand, put her chin in her hand, and shot Goldie a smile that was white and lovely in her tanned face. Goldie's wrinkles seemed to soften as he looked at her.

"But of course."

"How many of these—" she raised her glass slightly—"did Ron manage before he started spilling things on the bar?"

Ron mouthed "No," to Goldie, trying to communicate to him that if he answered honestly, then Hermione would be in for it.

Goldie seemed unconcerned—he ignored Ron and appeared to be considering Hermione's question quite thoughtfully. "Four..." he said, and then cocked his head to the side. "Or vos it five?"

Ron groaned. Hermione looked at her glass. "Probably five," she mused. "I remember how he behaved afterwards." She took her chin out of her hand and lifted her glass slightly to Goldie. "Five."

"Hermione..."

But she had downed the third shot, and was expertly pouring a fourth. "I don't know why you and Harry acted like such idiots. I honestly can't feel anything."

"You're not giving it enough time! Believe me, you're going to feel it."

Hermione scoffed at him and took her fourth drink.

Ron watched, no longer sure whether to be amused or worried as Hermione made for the fifth shot. He put out a hand to stop her, but Goldie's voice was suddenly in his ear. "A lesson," he said quietly. "Ven you are dealing vit a stubborn voman, you must let her find out for herself." Goldie laughed. "She is reminding me too much of a girl I knew. Let her do what she is doing; you know all de Sobering Charms by now."

Ron nodded. That was true—he did know every Sobering Charm in the book.

"Also," Goldie continued wisely, "after drinking so much, you never know vot she might say."

Ron's eyebrows shot up. That was *definitely* true. He grinned, realizing that this might be a rather advantageous situation. He crossed his arms on the bar and watched Hermione drink her fifth shot. Her cheeks were flushed pink and her eyes were unnaturally bright as she set down the glass and picked up the bottle.

"Now," she said dramatically, "watch as I spill *nothing*."

She poured a shot. Goldie applauded.

Ron sighed, picked up the little glass, and downed the contents himself before Hermione could attempt it. "You win," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and feigning disappointment. "Five shots, and no spilling."

Hermione shone at him. "I win," she repeated. "I win, I win. Well finally."

"And you still don't feel a thing, do you?" Ron encouraged, watching her intently as the alcohol began to take effect.

Hermione looked at him blankly. "Feel what? Where? Oh." She looked down at her shot glass as though it were a foreign object. "No, I—well, just the tiniest bit in my head, but I'm certain there's

nothing *really*... except my mouth is dry." She clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. "And it's all sticky."

Ron gripped his arms to stop himself from laughing. "Have some water, then."

"Right, that's a very good—do you know something, Ron?" She was staring at him, her mouth open slightly.

He shook his head, pressing his lips shut on the smile that was struggling to get out. "No," he said. "What is it?"

"You've got the loveliest hair." She put her chin in her hand again, and sighed. "And seven freckles right on your nose. Did you know there were seven? I've counted," she said seriously.

Goldie gave Ron a knowing smile over Hermione's shoulder, and moved away down the bar again.

Ron leaned close to Hermione so that the tips of their noses touched. She tried to kiss him but he pulled back slightly. "I want to let you do that," he murmured, "but you'd kill me if you remembered it tomorrow."

"Why would I?" she asked, sounding put out.

"You don't like public displays of affection," he reminded her.

Hermione's eyes widened, and then she nodded. "That's right. I don't. Can we go outside?"

Ron nodded back, unable to stop himself from laughing a little bit now. "Have a glass of water first, and then we can go wherever you want."

Hermione did have a glass of water, and then another, at Goldie's suggestion. And then, looking very pink, she held onto the bar with both hands and slid from her stool to her feet, somehow managing not to wobble.

"Goodnight, Goldie," she said solemnly.

"Goodnight, dear girl. Goodnight, Ron—visit more often."

Ron looked at him with a quick smile. "I will. Night." He couldn't concentrate on Goldie at the moment; Hermione had let go of the bar and was about to lose her balance. Ron grabbed her around the waist with his right arm while he fitted her cloak around her, then took her left hand in his and guided her out into the frozen January air.

When they were through the door and it had swung shut behind them, Hermione turned to Ron, pulled down his face with both her hands and asked abruptly, "This isn't public, is it?"

Then she kissed him. It was a kiss unlike any Hermione had ever given him. Ron found himself contemplating getting her lit more often; she was on the edge of herself and obviously unafraid of what she might do.

"And I *don't* need help," she said, pulling away from him and gasping for air. "You don't have to hold me up."

Ron tightened his arms around her. "Would you rather fall?"

"I won't!"

"I know." He wasn't going to let her. It was nice having the strongest woman he knew in his arms, and having her depend on him for a minute.

"Ron—" She threw back her head. "Ron, take me home."

Ron looked at her carefully. Hermione gazed up at him with her wide brown eyes, and a dangerous thrill ran up his center. "To Lupin Lodge?" he asked, a little hoarsely.

"To *your* house." She was leaning far back in his arms now, trusting him to hold her, her chin tilted all the way up so that she could look at the stars. "I want to go to your house, I'm not going home tonight." She laughed into the sky and shut her eyes. "This feels brilliant," she announced, and relaxed entirely, bending back in his arms.

Ron stared down at her and his body pulsed; he wanted exactly what she wanted. She was perfect.

"We can go to my house," he conceded gallantly, when he found his voice. Hermione righted herself and gave Ron a smile that did things to his blood; he put an arm around her back to keep her steady and they began to walk up the road from the village, back toward the outskirts of town.

"It's lovely out here." Hermione tilted back her head again as they walked. Ron kept his arm around her, guiding her so that she didn't have to look where she was going. "I missed England. I love nighttime. I don't know why, but I think I like it better than daytime and perhaps it's because of the Astronomy tower—do you know, sometimes on Wednesdays at midnight I feel I must be running late for something and then I realize it's because I know we're supposed to be going to Astronomy! And then I remember that it's all over and oh, Ron, I miss class so much, I miss Hogwarts all the time, don't you? I miss it the most at night although I don't know why because just *look* at all the times that we were out doing mad things in the middle of the night. You and Harry used to be terrible!"

She stopped and stamped her foot, drew a deep breath, and continued to walk and talk. Ron kept guiding her down the road, marveling at the rate at which she was speaking. He was determined to remember every word.

"Always getting us into trouble and it was never *my* fault. But I could never stay mad, I could *never* stay mad, because it was *you* and because it was usually for Harry... oh, Ron." Hermione sighed deeply. "What are we going to do about Harry?"

She looked up at him for an answer, but Ron didn't have one. He wasn't entirely sure what she meant by the question. "Why? What's wrong with Harry?"

"He's so unhappy. Those Dementors are hurting him, and Ginny can't do anything about it yet, and it's almost worse than watching him during the war. Because it should be over, and it's not, and it's not *fair*. It's not fair, you remember what Eloise Midgen put in the paper about Harry leaving his childhood behind all the time and it's true and it's *horrible*. I keep thinking about what he must see in his head every day, and you know what it's like with Dementors, it's like going through it all over again and how can he bear it—those things were so—" She was beginning to choke herself up. "I'd rather die than remember some of those things, I never want to remember the day they found my parents, I *never* want to remember how I felt when you were taken—"

Ron stopped walking. He turned her by the shoulders and pulled her close to him. "Hermione. Don't."

"We should remember the *good* things," she went on, and her voice was muffled against Ron's cloak. "We've all been together for so long and we've had such interesting adventures—" she looked up swiftly and grabbed Ron by his collar. "They *were* adventures, weren't they?" Her tone was urgent. "And we had fun together—and it was good, wasn't it—and lucky, in a way? Not just tragic."

Ron nodded, his chest burning. He hadn't expected her to talk about any of this, but perhaps it was time. "It was good," he managed huskily, his throat closing up.

"But I want my parents and I want Harry to have his parents, and I want you to have Percy, and we can't have any of those things."

Ron didn't know what to say. "Your parents aren't dead," he managed. "You don't know what'll happen."

"I used to think that," Hermione said bitterly. "I used to think I could bring them back, and that the people at St. Mungo's just weren't as smart as I am, but I can't help my parents. I haven't been able to think of anything. Nothing. I'm not a Thinker at all."

Ron looked at her in surprise. He had never heard Hermione admit defeat. Not really. "Hey." He squeezed her waist. "It's only been four months, you have to give yourself a chance."

She ignored him. "But things *will* get better," she said. "Other things will. The Ministry is getting better and the wizarding world is coming together—look what you're doing with Sirius, I'm so proud of you for that, and what you've done for Max—and Ginny's amazing, isn't she?"

Ron nodded.

Hermione's eyes flashed with tears. "Yes, and perhaps she can—but I don't want to think about it. And Hogwarts—Hogwarts will be like it was *before*," she continued fiercely, "like it was at *first*, when we were little. It'll be perfect. Won't it?"

"Yes."

"Because our children *have* to go there—I don't want them going anywhere else."

Ron started violently. Their children.

They had never said anything like that out loud to each other; however, the way it had tumbled effortlessly from Hermione's mouth told Ron that this was not a new thought for her. She must have thought about it without saying anything to him, and he was quite certain that she was only saying it aloud now because she was too intoxicated to censor herself. But in the back of Ron's mind the idea was scarily familiar, so much so that Hermione's words struck him with physical force. For a minute, he was the one in danger of losing his balance.

A sharp wind blew along the street, and Hermione let go of Ron. She pulled her cloak tighter and buried herself against him. "It's cold," she said, her teeth chattering.

"Come on." Ron took her around the waist and led her quickly up the road to the front door of the Notch. Hermione was quiet until he pulled his wand to unlock the door, when she gave a little moan and slumped against him. He turned to find that her face was slack and her eyes were falling shut.

"Are you sure you still want to come over?" he asked. "You're feeling all right? Let me take you home."

Hermione shook her head, her eyes still shut. "I want to stay with you," she said at once. And then she suddenly came to life again and began to giggle uncontrollably.

"What's so funny?"

"Harry charms his walls."

Ron lowered his wand. "What for?"

"What for?" Hermione repeated, looking up at him in surprise. "Well I expect we're very loud." She snickered. "Ginny taught him how at the Burrow, that's where they tested it, it's the Silent Bedchamber Charm."

Ron gaped at her. "They *tested* a Silent Bedchamber—"

"Hi there."

Ron's head snapped back to the doorway. Harry stood in it, his face expressionless, his clothes rumpled, and his hair a mess. He looked as though he'd just rolled out of bed.

"Did you forget how to get inside?" Harry asked.

"No." Ron narrowed his eyes. "Did we *wake* you, Harry?" he asked suspiciously, trying to peer past Harry and into the house. "Anyone *else* here?" he demanded.

Harry blinked at him. "No, I've just been lying around since I got home. Where've you been?"

"Pub," Ron answered. He jerked his head toward Hermione. "She's graduated from Butterbeer," he said, grinning. "Should have seen her throw back the shots, Harry—"

"Oh, *honestly*, Ron, I did not. Harry, hi!" She grabbed him in a hug. Over her shoulder, Harry looked at Ron, surprised. "Now move," Hermione said briskly, pushing him out of the way, "it's freezing, Harry, my goodness. Let us in, would you? I need to use the loo." Gripping the doorframe for balance, Hermione pushed past Harry into the warmth of the Notch, and disappeared down the hall on unsteady legs, discarding her cloak on the floor as she went.

Harry followed her with his eyes, which were open wide. "She's not really drunk?"

"Oh, but she is. Just wait till she gets going again, I'm sure it hasn't worn off."

"How much did she have?"

"Five shots. And not even an hour ago." Ron was pleased to see a grin spread across Harry's face.

"She'll never live this down."

"Absolutely not."

"Oooh, you've got a fire going, thank goodness, it's desperate outside." Hermione had returned to the room. She flopped on the sofa and spread out entirely, kicking her legs up over the arm of it and pushing off her shoes with her toes. They dropped to the wooden floor with two loud thumps. "What shall we do? Let's do something. Let's play something. We could play chess and I'll win—I feel marvelous—but I'm *starving*. Have you got anything to eat?"

"Look at her go," Ron muttered happily to Harry. "It's amazing how long she can talk without breathing, isn't it?"

Harry looked at him, and Ron saw, for the first time in a long time, the beginnings of active mischief glimmering in his friend's eyes. He bent toward it on instinct. "What are you thinking, Harry?"

Harry's mouth twisted into a half-smile, but he didn't answer directly. Instead, he pulled his wand and muttered "*Perscribus*."

Ron's mouth dropped open in appreciation. "Yeah," he whispered. "Wish I'd thought of that half-an-hour ago. Come on."

Harry went to the sofa, lifted Hermione's feet, and sat under them. Ron did the same with her head—she looked up into his face and smiled.

"Hi."

"Hi. Hermione, can I ask you something?" Ron shot Harry a glance. Harry stretched his arm out along the back of the sofa, dangling his wand behind it in his fingers unobtrusively, so that only the tip of it stuck up over the cushions, a foot from Hermione's face. The Recording Charm was in effect.

She shut her eyes and exhaled loudly. "Yes, yes, yes," was her singsong answer.

Ron and Harry caught eyes and both suppressed their laughter.

Ron cleared his throat. "Excellent. First off, I just want you to acknowledge that we're not catching you off guard—you haven't been drinking too much, have you?"

"No! Honestly!"

"Because I wouldn't want you getting upset later on, about anything you might say."

Hermione huffed. "Ron, stop it. I'm fine, I've told you and told you, I'm perfectly all right—Harry, I really *am* hungry, is there anything?"

"Sure, there's lots of stuff," Harry said easily, a smile twitching at his lips. "You've got your wand,

haven't you? Why don't you just Summon something?"

Hermione pulled her wand at once and pointed it into the air. She flicked her wrist much too hard, losing her grip and flinging the wand over Harry's head. Harry reached up and caught it.

"Damn!" she exclaimed, reaching out her hands. "Can I have that back and try it again?"

Ron nearly convulsed—getting Hermione to curse on record was too good to be true, and capturing her messing up a Charm was even better. He gripped Harry's wrist briefly.

"One down," Harry said under his breath.

"Nice," Ron agreed, distracting Hermione by Summoning a packet of Cauldron cakes from the kitchen and giving them to her. "Now," he muttered to Harry, "I've got one more thing I need for posterity, and then we can just ask whatever we want."

"What is it?"

"Lockhart."

Harry grinned. "Right—go for it."

"Hermione?"

"Mmmm?" Her mouth was quite full of Cauldron Cake, and she couldn't answer. She merely raised her eyebrows up at Ron, in response.

"When you've swallowed there—I was wondering if you still wrote Valentines to Gilderoy Lockhart every year? Or did you stop?"

Hermione sputtered. "Ron! I *never*!"

"You never? You can look me in the eye and say that?"

Hermione broke eye contact and turned her pink face to the fire.

"Aha! I *knew* you were one of the forty, or fifty-five, or whatever it was. I *knew* it. I knew you were all over him—"

"So what! I was a little girl and he was handsome! I know better now, I wouldn't go near him and of *course* I don't send him cards! *Honestly*! I can't make one tiny mistake? What was I supposed to think of him—he wrote all those books, and I didn't realize people just lied like that—"

"Bet you still have his signature stored away someplace."

"I do *not*!"

"Look me in the eye and say that."

Hermione looked him dead in the eye. "Ron, I most certainly do not have any such thing. I *know* what you think of me, but I was wrong about him and it's years since all that, so just leave me alone."

Ron sighed happily. "You were wrong, were you?" he repeated, for good measure. Harry moved his wand a bit closer.

"Yes," Hermione replied crossly. "Now go away." She unwrapped the second Cauldron Cake, put it to her mouth and took a very big bite.

Harry looked at Ron. "That good? Want me to cut it off?"

"No—are you cracked? Leave it going."

Hermione swallowed. "What are you both talking about?"

"Nothing," said Harry at once, lowering his wand again slightly.

She pouted up at Ron. "Are you having secret conversations?"

"Well.... yeah," said Ron, seeing his chance. "It's just that Harry's been wondering something." Ron nodded at Harry over the back of the couch. "He's too shy to ask you, of course, but I'm sure you know the answer—which of the girls in school had mad crushes on him?"

"You absolute prat," Harry muttered, yanking a cushion from behind him and pelting Ron with it at once. But Ron didn't mind—he could see that Harry was smiling, and that was what mattered. Also, Harry was looking rather interested in Hermione's response to the question. He was trying not to show it, but he'd definitely leaned in a bit, in order to listen.

For her part, Hermione sighed. "Well of *course* I know the answer to that," she said, importantly. She raised her hands a little and began to tick off on her fingers. "There was Parvati, of course."

"That's not true—" Harry began. But Hermione waved her hand at him impatiently.

"And what would you know about it? She did, for a little while. And then there was that Gryffindor a year ahead of us, Eleni Roil. But you don't want her, Harry. She snores. And then there was that girl from the other house, oh, which one was she—she was very nice. Sally-Anne Perks. Yes, she used to secretly cheer for Gryffindor during the Quidditch matches, that's what Lisa Turpin told Lavender."

"Hermione..." Harry said slowly, now looking a bit stunned, "I didn't know you ever even *talked* to Lavender."

"I hardly ever did about things like that, but you couldn't live in a room with Lavender and Parvati for seven years, without hearing about a few things. So that's what, three so far? And then there were two—"

"There were *more*?"

"If you'd kindly stop talking? There were at least two other ones—and one was three years behind us."

Harry's mouth fell open. "A fourth year? Oh shut up, you're joking."

"I'm not." Hermione giggled. "Anyway, what's wrong with that? I was in fourth year when I went to the ball with Viktor Krum, and he was your age." She shut her eyes and sighed.

"Well that's just sick," Ron muttered resentfully. He had never fully forgiven Viktor Krum.

Hermione's eyes snapped open and she looked up at him.

"Well maybe if you hadn't been such a git, I'd have gone with you, and not gone off with Viktor to try and make you jealous!" she cried, making an effort to stamp her foot and kicking Harry in the process.

"Ow, Hermione—"

But Ron didn't care who she kicked. "Shut your eyes a second, mate," he said to Harry. And when Harry had done so, Ron bent down and kissed Hermione fully on the mouth. A few moments passed in silence.

"All right. You can open 'em."

Harry did so, hiking his wand up behind the couch in order to catch what Hermione said next.

"Oh... Ron." Her eyes were still shut. "You know, there were girls who had crushes on you, too," she breathed. "Three that I knew of, but I was never going to tell you."

Harry sniggered a little, but Ron ignored him. "Why wouldn't you tell me?" he asked in surprise. He'd had no idea any girls had harbored crushes on him.

"You'd get a horrible, great big head."

Now Harry snorted openly. Ron glared at him.

"Well, now that school's finished, you can tell me. Who were they, then?" he demanded.

Hermione smiled deliciously. "Padma."

Ron gaped. "No she didn't!"

"Yes she did, for a bit. You two—" she pointed up at Ron with one hand and over at Harry with the other—"had twins after you. I used to think it was so fitting, because you were a couple of matching idiots and I thought it really ought to show."

"Well thanks," said Harry dryly.

"Ginny and I thought it was *so* funny."

"*Ginny* knew?" Ron and Harry asked at once.

Hermione snorted. "Tuh. She knew all this stuff. Oh, right! Harry—" Hermione tapped Harry's chest with her foot.

He caught her foot and pushed it away. "Would you stop kicking me? What?"

"I forgot to put Ginny on *your* list. But then that wasn't a crush." Hermione sighed. "She always loved you to pieces."

Harry turned his face so that Ron couldn't see it, but the back of Harry's neck turned bright red, and Ron wondered briefly just how far it had gone between those two. He'd never ask. But really, Silent *Bedchamber* Charms... Ron narrowed his eyes at Harry's glowing neck and a very clear mental image leapt into his brain. He shuddered. *Sick*. But his best friend wouldn't—not with his sister—he knew they fancied each other and all but Ginny hadn't even left school yet and surely they weren't—because it just wasn't natural—

"And then there was the Ravenclaw girl who liked you, Ron," Hermione went on, snapping Ron out of it. "The one who used to tell Lavender everything about everyone—Lisa Turpin. She used to ask Lavender to find things out about you, and then Lavender used to ask *me* for information, and I'd pass things along to Lisa the way I saw fit."

"Like what?!" Ron was truly astonished.

Hermione considered. "Like... 'Oh, Hermione, what's Ron's favorite color, by the way?' Because Lisa would want to try and wear it, you see."

"What did you say?"

Hermione snickered. "I said it was maroon."

She and Harry went into gales of laughter together, and Ron had to admit it was pretty funny. Hermione, tricking out other girls. Rather flattering, really. "And who was the other one—the third one?"

"Well, I shouldn't really tell you that," said Hermione, sounding a little worried.

"No?"

"You'll run off and find her."

Ron laughed, gently this time. "No."

"Well, then it was Eloise Midgen. But too late now, Ron, she's hardly a troll and she's got a boyfriend!" Hermione found this extremely amusing, and caught a serious fit of the giggles. Ron had no idea what she was on about, but it must've been very funny because Hermione could barely breathe for several minutes. She hung on to Ron's arm, shaking with laughter.

"Right," Ron finally said, trying to rein her back in. "You still with us, or do we have to cart you off to the loony bin?"

"I'm here," she gasped. But her giggles were rapidly dwindling. "Oh," she groaned suddenly. "Oh my goodness, it's terrible, when I shut my eyes everything keeps on moving..." Hermione made a horrible face, and contracted into a ball. She turned on her side and buried her face in Ron's shirt.

"Are you okay?" he asked worriedly. "Hermione?"

"I'm going to be sick. Help me."

"*Finite Incantatem*," Harry muttered, quitting their recording, and putting his wand in his belt. "Can't you do a Sobering Charm?"

"No—it would make her sober, but she'd still be sick, and then she'd be angry as well. She's better off like this."

"I'll get water."

"Thanks."

"No, I'll get—" Harry jumped up. "I'll get Ginny." He Disappeared.

Ron hardly had time to sort out what Harry was doing before Harry reappeared. Ginny tumbled out of their fireplace a second later, wearing a nightdress and looking very sleepy. "Ron, what did you *do*?" she demanded groggily, coming to the sofa and holding out her hands. "Oh, Hermione—poor thing! Harry, water."

Harry Summoned a glassful. Ron pulled Hermione up and cradled her so that she could drink, but she didn't take much before curling into a ball again. She shook her head fiercely. "Oooh, no, I can't, I can't... I just want to go to sleep but if I shut my eyes..." she shut her eyes and her forehead creased. "It goes round and round..." She whimpered.

"Yeah, it's the spins, Hermione." Ron Summoned Hermione's cloak from the floor and tucked it around her. "You'll be okay, it happens to everybody. Just hang on—" He hefted her into his arms and staggered to his feet.

"You could just float her," Harry suggested. "Want me to make a stretcher?"

"Don't you dare take her up the street!" Ginny snapped. She pointed to their hallway. "Take her to the toilet right now, she's going to be sick, there's nothing I can do about that and I shouldn't. Whatever she drank, it needs to come up."

"Oh, that's really nice," Ron muttered, but he carried Hermione into the toilet with Ginny at his back. "Should I put her—"

"Just help her kneel."

"Hermione? I'm going to put you down," Ron warned.

Hermione didn't answer, her face still pressed against Ron's chest and she gripped his shirtfront with both hands. Ron began to lower her, but Hermione shrieked loudly and refused to let go of him.

"Don't put me down, I'll be sick—don't put me down—"

"For God's sake, Ron." Ginny pushed her way around them in the tiny toilet and put one hand on Hermione's stomach and one on her head. Ron had no idea what she was doing, but it seemed to work, Hermione went slack.

"I can't believe you," Ginny muttered furiously at him, and Ron was struck anew by how much Ginny reminded him of their mum. "She *never* would have drunk this much on her own. Put her down and get out, I'll look after her."

Ron helped Hermione to her knees by the toilet, but lingered in the doorway, not wanting to leave her.

Hermione gasped suddenly and retched.

"Shh, it's all right." Ginny held her hair and rubbed her back. "Get out, Ron!" she hissed. "You did this, the least you can do is let her have some privacy!"

"It was her decision!" Ron retorted hotly, for once not seeing the joke. "I've got witnesses on that—go down and ask Goldie—I tried to stop her."

"Witnesses," Ginny said angrily. "Like it's one of your cases. *Go away.*" She raised a hand and, without her wand, made the door fly shut in Ron's face.

Ron returned to the living room, chagrined, and dropped onto the sofa. Harry sat at the other end, looking almost amused. "It's not funny," Ron pointed out.

Harry glanced at him. "All right. Chess?"

"While she's chundering? Oh yeah, that'd be really sensitive."

Harry's mouth twitched violently. "Erm, okay... Cannons?"

"What?"

"Cannons match is on, they're playing Puddlemere. I was listening to it when you got here. Turned it off when I heard people on the porch."

Ron had completely forgotten that there was a game. He had intended to go, but Hermione had shown up in Diagon Alley and he hadn't thought about it since. Obsession and guilt now fought for first place in his heart. "What was the score?"

"A hundred to a hundred and ten, Puddlemere in the lead."

"Christ!"

"Yeah."

"Well turn it on! But low," Ron added quickly. "Keep it low."

* * * * *

An hour later, the Cannons had beat Puddlemere by ten beautiful points, and Hermione lay passed out in Ron's bed. Ginny flopped between him and Harry on the sofa and shut her eyes. "I'm so tired," she yawned. "Thanks a *lot*, Ron."

"I'm telling you it was her idea," Ron insisted. "I told her to stop."

"Right." She sighed. "Well, there's not much Empathic magic can do for alcohol poisoning, apparently."

"Poisoning?" Ron repeated anxiously. "Does she need the hospital?"

"No." Ginny sighed. "She's fine now—how could you let her drink beer before shots? Beer before liquor, never sicker," she recited, and rubbed her temples. Ron watched Harry's hand move towards her back, but Ginny shook her head. "No don't, I'm all open."

Harry withdrew his hand and looked away. His neck was red again.

"Beer before liquor," Ron said curiously. "What's that? Where'd you learn that?"

Ginny looked at him in obvious surprise. "From Charlie," she said. "Didn't he teach you?"

Ron shook his head.

"And you never learned it at the Snout's Fair?" She shook her head as though she couldn't believe such incompetence. "Beer before liquor, never sicker. Liquor before beer, never fear."

"When did Charlie teach you *that*?"

Ginny laughed. "Oh you know. I was six, and he told me it was a poem he'd learned at school and that I should recite it for Dad once he and Bill had gone back to Hogwarts." She snickered. "I did it, too. I had no idea what I was talking about, but I'll never forget Dad's face." She yawned again. "I really needed my sleep tonight," she said, and shut her eyes. "Tomorrow's going to be..." she trailed off. "I need to go home."

"D'you have exams tomorrow or something?" Harry asked, looking concerned. "Need help studying?"

Ron rolled his eyes. Harry was whipped.

"No..." Ginny paused and opened her eyes. She glanced first at Harry, then at Ron, and then fixed her gaze on the fire. "Actually I might as well tell you both now, so that you're not surprised tomorrow."

Harry straightened up and Ron tensed. He didn't like the warning in her tone.

"What?" Harry asked.

Ginny pursed her lips. "I wrote to the Secretary Privy," she said slowly. "And I've had a letter back today."

Ron and Harry exchanged worried glances. This was about Azkaban and the dragons—Ginny hadn't mentioned it since Christmas, and Ron had assumed that their dad had made it impossible for her to pursue anything like that. He knew that Harry had counted on her not being allowed.

"And?" Harry demanded.

Ginny shot him an annoyed look. "And I've been invited to go up and have a look at the dragons tomorrow," she said. "So I'll see you at work."

"*What?*" Harry stared at her.

"I said," Ginny repeated in a clipped voice, looking back at the fire, "that I'll see you at work tomorrow, Harry."

Harry gaped.

"Dad'll never let you," Ron said flatly. "No matter what Privy Brown says. You'll go up there and he'll send you right back down."

Harry nodded violently.

"Actually, the letter came from Dad," Ginny smiled. "From the Office of the Minister of Magic. So it's official."

"Don't do it," Harry said. Ginny turned and glared at him, but Harry repeated himself. "Please don't, Ginny."

"You thought of me right away to help Hermione," Ginny said. "You didn't have any problems dragging me out of bed for that one."

"Hermione's not about to breathe fire at you and take your head off," Harry shot back.

Ron opened his mouth to suggest that that wasn't necessarily true, but Ginny was speaking again.

"You just don't want me hurt," she said. "I know that, and that's why I'm not really, *really* angry right now." But she sounded angry. She clenched her fists and her color rose.

"Look, you don't understand what it's like," Harry began.

"Well, I will tomorrow, won't I?" Ginny stood. "I'm going to go and get some sleep." She grabbed powder from the little clay pot on the mantelpiece and walked into the fireplace. "Thanks so much for the support, Harry—oh, and you're welcome for the help, Ron. Hope you both enjoyed your *Quidditch*."

"Ginny—" they both said at once.

"Lupin Lodge!" she interrupted. In a flash of green fire, she was gone. There was a short silence.

"You're in trouble," Ron said helpfully.

Harry glowered at him. "Yes, I noticed." He looked back at the fireplace. "Ginny wrote a Howler when I took this job," he nearly snarled. "*She's* allowed to worry. *She's* allowed to say 'No Harry, that's too dangerous, you can't do that!'" Harry's voice returned to its regular octave. "But when I say the same thing, I'm unsupportive. What's that about?"

Ron nodded. He knew exactly how Harry felt. "Oh, they're always allowed to do whatever they like," he said, reaching out to clap Harry on the shoulder. "They're always right, as well."

Harry breathed hard through his nose. "I'm just trying to tell her it's suicide."

"And I was just trying to tell Hermione that the Liquid Curse was too strong for her. Look where it got me."

"It got Hermione *sick*," Harry said. "And now Ginny wants to go and get herself torched alive, those dragons are *mad*, she's being really *stupid*—" he stopped and glanced at Ron. "Not that she's stupid," he said quickly.

Ron waved a dismissive hand. "Sure she is. So's Hermione. All those N.E.W.T.s and not a brain in her bloody head, I swear."

"It's ridiculous."

"It's pathetic."

"They're—she's—" Harry fell back onto the cushions.

"They're mental, Harry. Lunatics. And they can't help it, poor things." Ron sighed. "That was a brilliant match though, wasn't it?"

"I know, we should have *been* there for that one."

"Oliver must be coming out of his skin, playing his old team and winning."

"And they're still undefeated." Harry shook his head. "It's really something—you know, I bet they're still doing post match commentary and replays. Turn it back on."

Ron flicked his wand at the wireless. The two of them sat up half the night hashing through Quidditch plays and shouting about fouls—and reminding each other every so often that they had to keep it down or suffer, because Hermione was still asleep.

A/N: We were joking when we said that we'd written a sexy scene, which B Bennett had called "crap". We appreciate so many of you for standing up for us, but really, it was meant to be a joke. And even if we did write "sexy" scenes, we wouldn't post them at the Sugar Quill. This is a family site, folks!

Also sending a big thanks to the betas, who help us so, so, so much. Hug your beta today!

— CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE —

Toil and Trouble

Four month-old Percival Leander Weasley did not seem tired in the slightest, a fact that was very inconvenient to his mother. She shook a rattle in front of him and let him grab for it, hoping to tire him out, but he was indefatigable.

Normally, Penelope wouldn't have minded spending hours entertaining her son, but today was special. Hermione Granger had been appointed by the Ministry of Magic to help her work on the Imprisonment Charm that would surround Culparrat. Penelope had reached a dead end with her own research, and she knew from personal experience that Hermione was a brilliant witch—probably more so, now that she had apprenticed with a Thinker. Penelope told herself not to pin all her hopes on Hermione, but she couldn't help believing that a breakthrough was on the horizon.

Her father-in-law had assigned them a tiny office in a corner of the Ministry of Magic's main building. Penelope had spent the entire previous day trying to make it comfortable for two people, but it had been a real challenge. The office had been a mess of books and files left behind by a clerk who was now in Culparrat, awaiting trial. Ron Weasley had taken the files away for research, which had been a big help, and Penelope had gone in search of unoccupied desks and chairs that were small enough to fit into the room together. In the end she had been forced to shrink two desks and push them against the wall so that there would be enough room to accommodate Leo. Molly Weasley had offered to watch her grandson while Penelope was at work, but that orphan, Max, seemed to be more than a handful; and having Leo nearby made Penelope feel as though Percy was still there, somehow helping her to finish the work that they'd started together.

Penelope sent a colorful mobile to float above Leo's head, and then organized all the papers on her desk for the third time that morning. She doubted whether Hermione would be able to make any sense of them without her detailed explanations.

A soft knock at the door caused her to jump; she rushed to open it and found Hermione.

Hermione looked ... tired.

"Good morning!" Penelope said, feeling a bit disappointed that Hermione did not seem to be well rested for their first day at work. "Are you all right?"

Smiling, Hermione reached down to tickle Leo's stomach, and nodded.

"I had a bit of an unplanned incident last night at the Snout's Fair," she said, sounding sheepish. "Ginny helped the headache go away, so I feel fine—I just *look* awful."

"Nonsense," said Penelope, "you just look tired. But we can start slowly, if you like. I've been working on this for over a year. It's not like another day will make a big difference."

Hermione placed her rucksack on the table and sat down in one of the chairs, turning so that she faced the playpen. She reached into her bag and pulled out a quill, but instead of also retrieving paper and ink, she put the quill on the table, shook her head, and muttered something Penelope couldn't hear.

"Sorry?" Penelope said. She flicked her wand at the mobile, and the butterflies in it took turns flittering down to dance on Leo's head. "Hermione, honestly, it's all right if you'd rather wait until tomorrow." She hoped she didn't sound too disappointed. "I can always find something to do, and—"

"No!" said Hermione. "Really, I'm fine." She had her hands crossed, but her fingers were doing little dances around each other. "I'm—I'm a bit nervous, actually. And I'm supposed to be trying not to write things down as much. The quill is a crutch. Delia says I need to let my mind absorb facts as I learn them, and not depend on re-learning them later."

"Wow." Penelope looked askance at her piles of notes. "I'd never really thought about it before. I just always sort of assumed that it helped to take notes." A half-forgotten memory popped into Penelope's head. "One time, though, Percy and I went to hear Horatio York speak in the Ministry's Grand Hall. He's the wizard who helped regulate the Owl Post System. It was a fascinating speech,

and I remember almost every word of it. I didn't take notes there!"

Hermione nodded. "That's what you're supposed to do as a Thinker. Take that feeling and just sort of expand on it a little bit. The theory is that if you are listening to something with all of your concentration, then you'll retain more of it in your long-term memory. But it's so difficult for me!" Hermione threw up her hands in frustration. "I used to take notes even when I was reading for pleasure."

"Well, let's just try talking, then. I like that better anyway. I'll see if I can remember how much I've learned, and it'll feel less like work." Hermione seemed to be grateful for the guidance, and smiled.

Closing her eyes, Penelope tried to work out the best place to begin. She and Percy had started planning this over a year ago. So much had happened since then. Initially, they'd been trying to find an alternative to Dementors. What would be relevant to Hermione? Everything? Nothing?

"If you're trying to decide where to start," Hermione said, her voice sounding lower than usual, "it might be best to first try to explain the problem at hand. Don't worry about where it actually started. Think first about where it is now."

"We need a Dementor-free, magic-proof Imprisonment Charm. We need to keep people inside Culparrat in such a way that they will never be able to get out."

"Never?"

"Not unless they're pardoned."

"So, there needs to be a mechanism inside to allow prisoners to exit. And I suppose guards and the like would have to be able to move in and out."

"Yes," said Penelope. "But it's so difficult and I can't get my head around it all. In Muggle prison systems, they're limited. They have layers of deterrence. They've got iron bars, and locks, and guards, and in most cases, alarms and barbed wire. But all it takes to get a prisoner out of the compound is one guard or one official who knows the right codes. If a Muggle murderer escapes from prison, he can do harm in the world, but the implications are not nearly as serious as if a powerful Dark wizard escapes and gets hold of a wand."

Hermione had started to draw circles on the table with her fingers. She caught herself and stopped, placing her hands back in her lap. "Well, what layers do we have?"

"Obviously, we destroy their wands. That's the first order of business. The problem is that magic can be so unpredictable that there have been cases of wizards willing themselves out of prison in the past. There are a few types of wandless magic that can be performed by wizards as well—Animagi transformations, to take the most famous example."

"So," said Hermione, ticking things off with her fingers. "They have no wands. That's a minor deterrence. We're trying to avoid any sort of psychological manipulation of the type that was caused by the Dementors, so we have to assume that all prisoners will be in their right minds."

Penelope snorted. "As right as a murdering Death Eater can be in his mind."

"We *do* need to think about guards," said Hermione. "No matter what system is created and no matter how awful the crimes of the prisoners, they'll have to be fed and bathed and watched. And they have to be guards that are resistant to bribery and fiercely loyal to justice."

"That was one of the first things Percy and I thought about," said Penelope, surprised at how much she was remembering without the aid of her notes. "We started this whole project because of Fudge's insistence that Percy find an alternative guard solution to Dementors. But we couldn't find any group of creatures or special wizards that could handle it alone. The more powerful creatures, like the giants, have a history of inconsistency intermingling with wizards. Wizards tried to employ them in China in very early times, and the giants just sort of lost it one day and destroyed the prisons. Werewolves who are wizards have a history of loyalty to wizards in the rare times that they're accepted into society, but there's the issue of the days preceding and following the full moon. Also, we found that there are fewer and fewer werewolves in the wizarding world, due to Defense Against the Dark Arts education. Which is wonderful—we wouldn't want to inflict that on anyone unnecessarily." Penelope shivered as she thought of kind-hearted, gentle Professor Lupin.

"Percy had suggested using something like a Pogrebin," Penelope continued. "Do you know what that is?"

Hermione recited, "A Pogrebin is a Russian demon that affects people's minds. It can overcome people with a feeling of lethargy and despair, and force them into extended crying fits and feelings of futility. But—" Hermione looked confused "—they eat people, don't they?"

"Yes, they do," Penelope said, laughing. "But there are ways to stop them from doing that. You can feed them other things."

"Oh, good," said Hermione. "Although making the prisoners feel awful is exactly what we're

trying to get away from. That's why they don't want to keep them Stunned."

Privately, Penelope didn't think Stunning was too bad of a punishment for someone who had murdered others. More than once, especially while pregnant, she'd had fantasies about breaking into Azkaban and torturing all of the Death Eaters there. It never made her feel better, because it still didn't seem like a big enough punishment for those who had been responsible for her husband's death. "We don't want to coddle them," she said.

"True..." said Hermione, "but we also can't count on future generations being as fair in judgment as our current Ministry. There's always the possibility of innocents ending up in Culparrat, just as they did in Azkaban."

"Yes, I suppose," Penelope said. Usually, she found that she couldn't feel too worked up about that possibility. But then, every time she saw or spoke with Sirius Black, she was reminded of his story, and felt a renewed drive to make things right. It was just that every so often, as she'd worked on this charm, she'd thrown her hands up in disgust and thought, 'It would be so easy if we could be the slightest bit cruel, and, after all, they *are* guilty of *crimes*.'

Hermione's eyes had been closed, and she opened them, a solemn expression on her face. "Let's start with the basics," she said. "Did you and Percy ever come up with a concept for a simple containment spell?"

"Yes." Penelope reached over to her pile of parchment, and pulled out a roll that had *Spell Map* written on the side of it. "We had written out about eight different options for containment spells before... Percy... well, there was one that he liked best of all, and when I was pregnant with Leo, I worked on that one the most. I don't know all of the advanced Arithmancy to actually construct it, but I've done research into the theory."

"Let me see," said Hermione. She held out her hand and opened the roll of parchment. She looked at it for several minutes, her brow creased. Penelope, who hadn't shown her charts and diagrams to anyone, stood up and wandered over to watch Leo sleep. The charts were probably terrible. She'd been staring at the diagrams for so long that she'd probably missed a major point somewhere along the way. She definitely should have waited a few days before showing everything to Hermione. Penelope knew she wasn't as smart as Percy had been, and she could have used his excellent mind for Arithmancy when doing her research. Their basic idea had been that, rather than surrounding a building with a charm, they would surround the prisoners with the charm. The prisoners would be bound individually to the building. If they tried to leave, their personal boundary would do any number of things to prevent them—catch fire, freeze, put them to sleep—she and Percy had spent an entire evening coming up with more and more outrageous "punishments" for prisoners who tried to escape their new 'cells'...

"Penny?" Hermione's voice interrupted her train of self-doubt, and she turned to see Hermione looking much more alert than she had earlier. "This is brilliant. How did you come up with it?"

"You really think so?" Penelope asked, not quite sure she could believe what she was hearing. "You really think it will work?"

"Well, it should work, in terms of keeping something inside something else. We still have all those other issues to work out—guards, unexpected magic, incompetent judicial systems—but a strong containment spell would have to be at the root of things, and I really think this can work."

"You don't think," asked Penelope, remembering how much sleep she'd lost over the charm, "that the idea of locking into someone's aura is too invasive— that it's too close to Stunning?"

"No!" Hermione shook her head. "Not at all! It's perfect! I wish I could have thought of it. Delia tried to get me to find a way to keep gnats away from a pomegranate when I was in Cortona. I came up with something similar, but in reverse. I surrounded the pomegranate with a barrier—I used good, solid magic, and I was pretty proud of it, but anyone *trying* to break it would have immediately tried to go for the pomegranate, and not the gnats and flies and insects. Of course, the spell you conceived wouldn't have worked in that situation because we wouldn't possibly be able to get to all of the possible set of insects who could potentially attack the fruit, but with Culparrat, we have a finite number of identifiable prisoners, and..."

Penelope wasn't really sure where Hermione was headed with this, but she listened patiently. Maybe part of being a Thinker was to ramble until you found an answer. She must have looked confused, however, because Hermione laughed at her.

"It's all right, Penny," she said. "I'll stop rambling. Your eyes were starting to glaze over, and I know from Ron that means it's time to stop."

"So," Penelope repeated, "you're saying you think it could work?"

"Yes." Hermione rolled up the parchment and gave it back to Penelope. "Put that in a safe place. It's now a high-security document. I think we still need some more layers of containment charms, just to be safe. We could rework my pomegranate spell for the building anyway, just to add some

extra security. And we'll definitely need another layer. But I think we should start working with this. I don't know why you thought you needed my help—you've had it figured out all this time."

"I don't know about that," Penelope said, laughing. She felt more light-hearted than she had in months. "You're right—we still have a lot of work to do, which is good, because I need to work to pay for my new house."

"Oh!" Hermione leaned forward, and looked at Penelope with enthusiasm. "When are you moving? I didn't know that you'd found someplace."

"Well, Molly's not really talking about it, and there were too many other things happening at Christmas," said Penelope. Molly Weasley was routinely "forgetting" about Penelope's impending move, and had even asked her, a week earlier, if she'd like to redecorate Leo's room, since he'd soon be too old for cuddly bears and balloons. "But yes, I found a place here in Diagon Alley, close to the Ministry. We're moving in February."

"How exciting!" said Hermione. "I've always thought it would be lovely to live on Diagon Alley. I don't think I'll ever stop being fascinated by the things I see here. And I used to be so jealous when I'd come before school to buy my things, and see the young wizard children running about. Not that I had a bad childhood—it was lovely—but it was a Muggle upbringing."

Penelope smiled in agreement. "In a way, I think that being raised a Muggle makes people more fiercely interested in magical things. I... I love the Burrow," she said. It felt good to have someone to talk to—another girl, with her background. She rarely saw Cho, except when working, and she'd lost touch with many of the other girls she'd known in school. "I would love for Leo to grow up there, and we'll still probably spend our weekends there. But I do need my own place. I can't live with Percy's parents forever."

"Of course not!" said Hermione.

"It was difficult for Percy, growing up there, and I think that's always in the back of my mind. *He* wouldn't want to live there. He loved his family, he loved his parents, and he loved his siblings, no matter how much of a hard time they seemed to give him. But he was different. He was so much more serious. And the same things that make the Burrow such a wonderful, *homey* place are the things that make it difficult to live there sometimes. I know that he always felt closest to Ginny, even though she was so much younger, because she seemed to be able to sense when to stop. I guess we know the reason behind that now as well, don't we?"

"Yes, we do," said Hermione, looking distant. But before Penelope could ask what the matter was, Hermione shook herself and smiled. "You better watch out for Leo. Who knows what sort of super powers he may have inherited. All of them are overachievers in their own way. Even Fred and George."

"You know," said Penelope, wondering if it was okay to gossip about your private life in an office at the Ministry of Magic. It seemed more out of place than in the kitchen of the Burrow, even if there was a playpen sitting in the middle of the room. "Fred and George were so horrible to Percy, growing up. One time, he wrote me a letter, and it said, '*if it weren't for the twins making my life a living hell every day, I think that my family life would be quite pleasant.*' I think they realize now how sensitive he was to their teasing. Fred finds excuses all the time to drop in and play with Leo. Sometimes I wouldn't even know he'd been by, except that there's usually a new toy in Leo's hand."

They both laughed—so loudly, in fact, that Leo woke up and began to laugh as well. Penelope wandered over to him and reached down to tickle his toes.

"Well, I'm proud of you," said Hermione. "And I promise to visit whenever you invite me."

"You're always invited," said Penelope, lifting Leo out of the playpen and carrying him over to the chair. "Especially if you'd like to babysit."

Hermione kissed Leo's head, and then sat back down in her seat. She pulled out a piece of parchment and, inking her quill, said, "I think we need to draft a letter."

"To whom?"

"Well, what we really need is a professional Charmer. We could try building the spell in miniature and begin working with it, but really, we need someone with experience in building large Charms to come and tell us how this would work on a grand scale. I was going to write to Delia and see if she could recommend anyone."

With the feeling of light-heartedness came a feeling of relief. Penelope hadn't been sure how she was going to build any spell once she'd thought of it. Why it hadn't occurred to her to ask Arthur for the services of a professional Charmer was beyond her, but it certainly seemed like the most obvious step. "You might want to write to Professor McGonagall as well. They've been building all sorts of charms at Hogwarts. They must be working with someone... or several someones."

"Good point," said Hermione. "I'll draft two letters. Until then, we should start thinking about our other problems. Layers. We need layers. We've done a lot—well, you have, really. We've still got

so much to do, though. But I think this is enough for today.” Hermione yawned.

Penelope nodded in agreement. They still did have a lot of work to do, but now that she was working *with* someone, Penelope felt like it would be no problem at all.

* * * * *

Ginny stood outside her father’s office, feeling for the first time as if he were really the Minister of Magic. The scroll in her hand was so... official.

“Ms Virginia Weasley:

It has come to our attention that you are a practitioner of Empathic magic. Your valuable presence is requested at the Ministry of Magic on the 5th day of January, 1999. Please arrive with your broomstick, and whatever materials are necessary to the art of Healing. You will be escorted to the dragon enclosure on the shoreline opposite Azkaban, where it is hoped that you will be of service to the Permanent Azkaban Patrol in determining what ails their dragons.

Thank you for your time,

Arthur Weasley

Minister of Magic”

She rolled up the parchment, and stuck it in her pocket, feeling very nervous. She had wanted, very much, to go out to Azkaban and see what it was like. She had sworn to herself that she would work out a way to get there. But though she couldn’t wait to test her skills on the dragons, she hoped—very secretly—that Charlie was planning to hold her hand.

“Miss Weasley.” Arthur’s personal guard had opened the door for her, and he was smiling. “Your father is ready for you.”

“Thanks, Lawrence.” She walked into the office, and was glad to see that Charlie was already standing there, alongside her father. “Hi—” she barely managed, before her voice was muffled in Charlie’s robes. He’d pulled her into such a tight hug that she could barely keep her grip on her broomstick.

“You’re a good one for secrets,” he said quietly.

“I wasn’t planning to keep it secret,” she said honestly. “I just wanted more time to practice first.”

“It’s all right.” He squeezed her again, and let her go. “I’m not that surprised. You were always really... sensitive.” He stepped back and gazed apologetically at her. “I thought it was because you were the girl, but I suppose we should have paid more attention. Bill says there were plenty of signs—”

“No, no,” Ginny hurried to correct him. “It was dormant when I was at home and anyway, you hardly lived there with me—you had no way of knowing. Hi, Dad.”

Her father hugged her too, and then sat down behind his desk, where he picked up a quill and bent over a bit of parchment. Ginny noticed how silvery the red hair around his bald spot was becoming; she had never noticed that before, and it shocked her. He finished writing and held out a Ministry visitor’s badge, which hung on a cord. “Wear this at Azkaban so you’re not mistaken for an intruder.”

“She won’t have trouble,” Charlie said. He had been staring at Ginny all the while, his arms folded across his chest. “You ready, Ginny?”

“Look after her, Charlie.”

“I will.”

Ginny hung the badge around her neck, feeling very warm. For once, their protectiveness was rather nice. It had a ring of something precious to it, as if she was something to be protected not because she was the youngest, or the girl, but because she was special in her own right.

“You’re going to have to go by Floo powder to the inn at Stornoway,” Charlie explained, pointing to it on a map he’d produced from his pocket. “I’ll meet you there. And then we’ll fly. It takes about ten minutes in the air, but it’s the closest we can get. There’s no Floo portal on the shoreline, for security reasons. See you at the inn.” He disappeared.

“I suppose this would all be much easier if you could Apparate,” Arthur mumbled, from behind his desk. “Speak to me about that later, would you, Ginny? We’ll arrange something.”

Ginny gaped at her father. He had once said that he would never consider pushing up her Apparition Examination, for any reason. “Sure, Dad,” she replied dazedly, before following Charlie into the fireplace, her broomstick in hand.

They were only a moment at the inn before they mounted their brooms; Charlie told her to keep low around the outside of the village, but otherwise gave her no instructions. She felt oddly grown up, flying beside her second-eldest brother as he gave her a quick rundown of what had been happening with the dragons. He gave her the information without adding explanations for her benefit and, for the first time, Ginny felt as though he were looking at her as an adult and a comrade, the way he looked at Bill. That she knew something he didn't know—that she possessed a talent he needed—was a lovely shock. It had always been the other way around.

"Charlie," she asked, when he'd finished telling her everything, "do you really think that the dragons have human energy, or do you just say so because you're crazy about them?" She pulled her cloak a little tighter with one hand as they neared the sea; a cold wind whipped her hair about her face and made her shiver.

"I really think they've... I don't know if it's human? But they're highly intelligent, and they've got emotions, I'll swear on it. I'm worried that's why they're acting up. The Dementors might have taken a toll on them."

"But Dementors remind victims of horror. What horrors could the dragons possibly have?"

Charlie gripped his broom and veered left into a thicket, before answering. "This way's faster," he muttered. "I don't know how it's possible for them to be affected. I'm hoping you'll tell me it's some sort of cold."

"Dragons get colds?"

"Of course they do," Charlie said defensively. "They get upper respiratory infections in those giant nostrils of theirs and then they can't release their smoke properly and it chars their throats—horrible for the poor beasts."

Ginny hid a smile. "Yes, the poor beasts," she agreed. "But wouldn't you know if it were a cold?"

Charlie sighed. "Yes," he admitted. "We've checked them for the usual physical ailments. Eyes are the weak point, and that was the first thing we examined. Then the nostrils. Then we poke about their privates—"

Ginny made a disgusted noise. "Char-lie!"

"I'll give it to you in technical terms, if you like."

"You're revolting!"

He laughed. "This way, we're nearly there," he said, and rose up above the trees. Ginny followed suit, and gasped at the sight of the shoreline, stretching north and south as far as she could see against the dark gray sea. Far out across the water, she spotted a pinprick of an island. *Azkaban*.

"Where are the dragons?" she murmured, still staring out over the ocean as she brought her broom to a safe landing beside her brother's. Her shoes sank into the soft, sandy earth and the cold salt breeze cut across her skin. It was freezing, out here. She tucked her muffler closer around her neck.

"It's all right there." Charlie pointed into space. "Amazing enchantments, aren't they?"

"Wow..." Ginny had seen things made invisible, of course—but this was more impressive than usual. An entire dragon camp was right in front of her, and all she could see were the rocks and the sea and the sky. Charlie led her between two standing stones, and Ginny gasped. Dragons were all around her. "They really are... amazing, Charlie," she whispered, standing rather close to him.

"I know," he said. "Come here, you'll need these." Charlie had led her to a massive tent, within which was a row of lockers. He opened one and started to hand her heavy, fireproof clothing. "That's a jacket," he said, "and here are trousers—they ought to fit over what you've already got on. Here are your goggles, and these are gloves—"

"I know what they are," Ginny said, pulling off her cloak and looking around the tent as she donned her gear. Dragon camp—she was really at a dragon camp—the smell of animal and human sweat mingled thickly in the air and she felt again the strong sense that she had finally grown up. She had been let into one of her brothers' secret worlds. This was what Charlie did every day; he came here to these tents and put on his scary looking gear and organized a camp full of dragons and riders for the Ministry of Magic. He was really something. She shut her jacket and tightened the cords across her chest, noticing Charlie's impressed look.

"You got the hang of that quickly."

She declined to tell him that she'd practiced on Harry's jacket, last fall. "Right, so, what now?"

"Fireproof your broomstick," Charlie instructed.

"Did it at home," Ginny said, digging through her cloak pockets for a hair bobble. She pulled her hair back tight. "I'm ready."

A sudden, hot wind blew back the tent flaps, and there was a sound of loud, leathery flapping, followed by a giant snort.

"Day shift's back," Charlie said. "Good, now you can have a look at Norbert—he's been behaving worst of all—Harry's been having a hell of a time."

"Then put him on another dragon!"

"He wants Norbert. I'm not a tyrant, you know—no more of your Howlers, thank you very much." Charlie took her cloak away and handed her a heavier one, made of dragon hide. "It's freezing cold out here," he said, helping her put it over her shoulders, and reaching for the clasps.

"I can do it," Ginny said automatically, but she didn't brush his hands away. "Percy used to do up my cloak," she murmured, remembering all the times he'd fussed over her in school.

Charlie gave a wistful smile, finished buttoning her up, and kissed her lightly on the top of her head. "Let's go meet the dragons, shall we? And you can... do whatever it is you do."

Ginny shoved down the fit of nerves that threatened to overtake her. She *could* do this. She had been practicing nonstop on all the house animals, and on all the magical creatures that Remus had managed to acquire. She could *do* this.

Charlie led her out of the tent and Ginny took an automatic step back—the newly landed dragon was very, very close; it gave a great roar and shot a bellowing wave of fire into the sky. A dozen keepers, all dressed in gear like Ginny's, surrounded the giant green animal and led it away. It snorted and stamped—it didn't look a bit happy, and neither did Mick O'Malley, who dropped to the ground to avoid being smashed by its tail as it stormed away.

"Viking's got a bit of a temper this afternoon," Mick said, getting to his feet and wiping his gloves on the front of his jacket as Ginny and Charlie walked into the clearing to meet him. "Hope we can get this all sorted out—hello, Ginny." He stuck out his hand, and Ginny shook it.

"You're the species specialist?"

"S'right."

"And this is affecting all the breeds?" Ginny asked briskly. She had a list of necessary questions in her head, and she hoped she would remember to ask them all. She felt odd and vulnerable, as if at any moment they would all realize that she wasn't a professional at all, and that she had no idea what she was doing here.

Mick didn't seem to notice her insecurity. "Every dragon that flies full shifts has started to buck in midair, just recently. They're showing typical signs of physical pain, but we can't for the life of us work out where it's coming from, and Charlie's suggested it might be emotional distress." Mick rubbed his forehead. "I don't know if it's possible, but... it just might be. They're all giving us hell—the four Welsh Greens, the Fireball, and the Norwegian Ridgeback. I'd say the Fireball's feeling it least, and the Ridgeback's getting the worst of it. Let's back out of this area, Harry was right behind me and I don't want to get trampled by that crazy animal he's riding."

Ginny cringed inwardly at the thought of Harry on a maddened dragon; she shot Charlie a warning look, which he ignored. He grabbed her arm and marched her out of the clearing.

Seconds later there was another blast of fiery air, and a dragon even more enormous than the first one landed just beside them. Ginny clenched her fists so tightly that they hurt. Harry was sitting on top of the dragon, seeming very small as he pulled giant straps over his head and yanked his boots out of stirrups. He looked tense and exhausted. The keepers that had taken Viking to his enclosure were running back now, wands out, and it took every one of them to control Harry's dragon. Norbert raised his wings with a frustrated roar and brought them slamming down on either side of him; Harry shouted out and clutched at his harness. There was nothing holding him to the dragon's back any longer, and he fumbled for his Firebolt.

"I'm going to kill you, Charlie," Ginny said, her voice tight, hardly noticing that her brother had dived into the fray and was giving assistance to the other keepers. She couldn't tear her eyes away from Harry, who was still struggling not to plummet as Norbert brought his wings up and down once more with a mighty crash. The dragon breathed a harsh, streaming jet of fire at the nearest keeper, who barely managed to deflect it.

"Get that insane beast out of the clearing," someone ordered, from above. Ginny looked up to see Draco Malfoy, his wand touched to his throat, perched carelessly atop a Chinese Fireball and looking extremely put out. "My shift is over."

"You'll have to wait, Malfoy," Harry yelled irritably, not turning around. He had got his Firebolt free, and was finally climbing out of his harness. He was off the dragon's back in a matter of seconds, and Ginny only released her breath when both his feet were safely on the ground.

"Harry," she called out, not able to stop herself.

His head snapped toward her and he stood still.

"DOWN, HARRY!" Charlie yelled, and Ginny stifled a scream. Norbert had brought his tail around so quickly that she hadn't seen it coming—it was inches from slamming Harry's head—Harry dropped

to the ground and flattened himself against it at the sound of Charlie's voice, and barely avoided being beaten to a pulp.

"He can't ride that dragon anymore," Ginny heard herself saying, hardly aware of her words. "Bring another one out here, this is ridiculous, this isn't safe—"

"That's why you're here, isn't it?" Harry had managed to scramble away from Norbert; he came to the edge of the landing area and stood several feet away from Ginny, breathing hard. "You're going to look at him, aren't you?"

It was a moment before Ginny could gather her thoughts. Harry was gray with fatigue; his skin was ashen and sweating, and his eyes were feverishly bright. All day, he had relived the cruelest moments of his past. She heard pleading voices swimming toward her; felt the aching waves of his disgust and fear. Her stomach began to tie in knots and she felt the overwhelming compulsion to go to him—to put her hands on him—

Block it, she heard Remus direct sternly, in the back of her mind. *Block it. Block it.*

It was excruciating, but she managed to drag an open corner of her mind shut again. "I'm... supposed to look at all the dragons," she answered slowly, and worked on reining in the rest of herself, a fraction at a time. In the near distance she could see Draco Malfoy's dragon landing, and the shouts of the keepers helped refocus her mind on her purpose. "I hope I'll be able to help."

"Just be careful." Harry's voice was low, and Ginny found it almost impossible to continue to block him now. Mixed with his unpleasant vibrations, she could feel another energy from him—one she didn't want to deflect. He really did care for her. Ginny had to look away.

"There are other trained dragons," she said. "Aren't there? Why don't they send for one? You shouldn't be on Norbert. He's not tame."

"Brilliant observation," came a cold voice from the clearing. Ginny turned toward it and narrowed her eyes. Malfoy was approaching them. He stopped just inches from Ginny, and she stiffened. "Is that what they brought you out here to tell us?" he asked sarcastically. "That Potter's dragon is deranged? What an astounding *gift* you have, Weasley."

"Shut up." Harry stepped up beside Ginny. She felt the sudden warmth of his defensiveness, and permitted herself a tiny smile before working to block it out. "You said your shift was over," Harry said, "so go home."

"If she's here to look at dragons," Malfoy returned, "then I'm not going anywhere until she's looked at Mordor."

"*She* has a *name*," Harry hissed.

"I understand that Mordor is less affected than the others," Ginny replied with pointed efficiency, hoping the fight wouldn't escalate. It wasn't worth it. "So I'll probably begin with Norbert, since he looks worst."

"Oh, of course," Malfoy said. He ran a gloved hand through his fine hair, and smirked at her. "Must take care of *Potter*."

Ginny didn't even flinch, and she congratulated herself for it. Things had certainly changed. "Yes, that's right," she returned, in a voice as cool as Malfoy's. "Excuse me." She swept past him towards Charlie, who was standing half-slumped and panting in the center of the landing area, watching as the keepers led Mordor away, with Mick at their head. "You okay?" she asked quietly, when she was close enough.

Charlie shrugged and straightened. "Could you tell anything?" he asked, in lieu of an answer. "Did you—get a vibe, or something?"

"What—from the dragons? No, I need to get closer to them, Charlie. They're huge. I can't tell anything standing down at their feet."

Charlie's eyebrows shot up. "You want to get closer?"

"I don't have a choice. I think I should start with Norbert—he's worst off, so he'll be the easiest to read. So just go on and stun him—"

"Stun him?" Charlie gave a tired laugh. "He's just flown for ten hours. He has to eat, he has to hydrate, he has to have a proper rest or he won't be any good to us tomorrow—I can't stun him."

"Well, which one can you stun then?"

"Of the full shift dragons? I can't stun any. You can stand outside the enclosures, and that's about it."

Ginny felt a thrill of fear. She hadn't expected that the dragons would be awake for their examinations. "Charlie, you don't understand. I can't *feel* anything from outside the enclosures. I have to be in range."

"Well, if you think I'm going to fly you up next to one of their heads, you can think again."

"I thought you were supposed to know how to do that!"

"I do. And I don't mind risking my neck. But I won't risk yours—not like that, not with how they've been behaving."

"Well, what am I wearing all of this for, then?" Ginny demanded, tugging at her protective gear.

Charlie shook his head. "Fireproof all the clothes you want, they'll still turn you to a crisp if you make a false move."

"They're unstable, Ginny."

She jumped. Harry had practically sneaked up behind her. "I have to get close," she pleaded, turning to him for support, "and I really want to get this over with. But Charlie won't take me up—will you do it?"

Harry glanced at Charlie before answering. "No. I don't think it's safe."

"Oh, this is just *rich*!" Ginny glowered from one to the other of them. "You—" she pointed at Charlie "—have been dragon keeping for ages, driving Mum wild with fear. And you—" she glared at Harry "—have been strapped to a mad dragon all day long. But it's not safe for *me*?" She shivered with anger, amazed that she could have felt, earlier, that she was being treated as an equal. She should have known better; when push came to shove, she was still considered a child. "Which of you is going to take me closer?"

Charlie and Harry exchanged another glance, and Harry shifted uncomfortably, but neither seemed inclined to change his mind.

"Is there a problem?" Malfoy called, from the edge of the clearing. When Ginny turned, she found him looking right at her. "Do you plan to do your job, Weasley, or are you going to be useless, like the rest of your—"

"Sod off," Charlie called back, before Malfoy could finish. "Nobody's interested in your opinion."

Malfoy walked slowly up to Charlie, still holding his broom, his riding gloves dangling from his other hand. "You should be," he said softly. "Unlike you, I have no need of a job."

Charlie and Harry both opened their mouths, looking ready to swear, but Malfoy cut them off.

"Insult me again, and I'll quit. I mean it." He raised an eyebrow. "Don't pretend you can replace me. You're having trouble finding riders."

Charlie made a growling sort of noise. Harry turned away.

"I asked what the problem was," Malfoy repeated, his voice icy. "Can someone explain why she—" he gestured to Ginny "—is standing around chatting while my dragon gets worse? I think you're aware of what I've invested to be sure of proper treatment for Mordor. Your specialists have spent all their time examining the Ridgeback—I want *her* to look at *my* dragon. Now."

"She's not looking at anything," Charlie seethed, "until we get things straightened out."

Malfoy turned his stare on Ginny. "What things?"

"Apparently it's *unsafe*," Ginny explained, clipping her words to let Harry and Charlie know just how she felt about it, "for me to examine the dragons while they're awake. I assumed they'd be stunned, but since that's not possible—"

"Of course you can examine them awake," Malfoy said with a snort.

"No. I can't do it from outside their stables. I need to get close to the—"

"I know what Healers *do*," said Malfoy in an impatient, patronizing tone of voice. "Go up and *do* it."

"She's not flying up on her own," Charlie said, looking outraged. "She's untrained."

"Then go with her. Honestly, must your decisions be supervised?" Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Why doesn't Potter take her?"

Charlie looked as if he wanted to say something truly rude, but he bit his tongue.

"It's not going to happen," Harry said flatly. "It's going to have to wait."

Malfoy gave Harry a lazy smile. "Scared of them?" he asked, and jerked his head toward the dragon enclosures. "Well, I'm not. And I'm not going to spend the evening here, while you play protect the girlfriend. I'll take her up." Malfoy pulled his riding gloves back on and mounted his broom. He fixed Ginny with a very unsettling look. "Get on."

Ginny hesitated. Her skin crawled at the very idea of being so near to Malfoy, for any reason. To trust him, after all he had done to hurt her family and friends, was pure foolishness. On the other hand... if no one else was going to give her the opportunity to do the job she'd been hired to do...

"Don't even try it, Malfoy." Harry's hand was very near his wand.

"Oh, just stop," Ginny burst suddenly, looking at him in annoyance. "I came out here to do a job, and I'm going to do it." She undid her cloak and handed it to a very surprised Charlie, got astride Malfoy's broom so that she sat in front of him, and clutched the handle with both her hands.

"Ginny, don't you—" Charlie started, but Ginny didn't hear the rest of it, nor did she have to stay

on the ground long to endure the look of pure horror on Harry's face. Malfoy had reached around her, grabbed hold of the broom, and kicked off the ground at top speed. They were fifty feet in the air within seconds.

"Take me to Norbert first," Ginny yelled over her shoulder, trying to move forward as much as possible. A wave of something vicious and cold had surrounded her, and she realized that she was in Malfoy's aura. It was by far the most disturbing she had yet encountered. Malfoy had been through the same war as the rest of them... but in such a different manner. His energy was riddled with violence. Darkness. Ginny shuddered.

"No." Malfoy steered a straight course for his dragon's stable. "If Potter wants his dragon looked at, let him deal with it."

"I'm telling you," Ginny returned angrily, "that if Norbert feels the worst, I'll have the easiest time reading him. This has nothing to do with personal preference."

"Of course it doesn't." Malfoy did not change direction.

"The quicker I can work out what's wrong, the quicker your dragon will have a remedy," Ginny yelled over the rushing wind, "and I'm telling you for the last time, Malfoy, Norbert will be the quickest way to tell. I don't want to stay up here any longer than you do."

It was ridiculous. Like talking to a wall. Malfoy laughed softly, near her ear, and Ginny felt ill. Again she felt the icy rush of his hatred—his past. It was a past that included violence against the Grangers and violence against her brothers—there was real cruelty in his energy. And beneath that cruelty, threatening to swallow her like an undertow, there was sickening grief. Malfoy's whole aura twisted with a black, relentless suffering, and, quite against her will, Ginny found that she was raising her hands and turning towards him. Whatever tortured Malfoy, she was distraught to realize, she felt compelled to drive it out.

Block it. Ginny shook her head and straightened her spine. Remus's voice was suddenly strong in her mind again. *Block it. He isn't there.*

"Fine, Weasley, have it your way." Malfoy jerked the nose of the broom so violently that Ginny feared she would tumble from it, but he turned them toward Norbert's enclosure. "You better be right."

Malfoy flew fearlessly towards the dragon; it startled Ginny, who had expected less from him. "Don't get too close," she warned, when Malfoy made no sign of slowing down. They were twenty meters from Norbert's immense head.

"Nothing will happen," Malfoy said, speeding up.

"Don't get that close," Ginny repeated, yelping in terror and sliding back into Malfoy on instinct. They weren't ten feet from Norbert's sharp, bronze horns. His enormous right eye glinted madly. He turned his giant, scaly face towards them and opened his jaws—Ginny could see all his massive teeth—they were each the size of her hand—he must be about to breathe fire right at her—

Malfoy raised his hand, and Norbert's mouth closed at once. His head swiveled away.

"Back up!" Ginny shouted, terrified, elbowing at Malfoy to do something. This was lunacy. It was suicide to stay this close to a dragon. He must be trying to kill her.

"You're fine," Malfoy said, sounding bored. "He's not even looking at you. Stop kicking."

"We're too close—I mean it!" Ginny tried to steer the broom herself, but couldn't pry his hands from the handle.

"You Gryffindors are all talk." Malfoy gave a derisive laugh. "Frightened of a dragon."

"It's good sense to be frightened of some things—now back up—" She managed to get the broom to point left, and tried to fly it away from Norbert.

Malfoy jerked the broom back into place with a snarl. "Do you honestly think I'd risk my life just to scare you?" he asked, his voice suddenly very low. "Do you think for one second I'd *bother* putting you in danger? Not that I care if you burn to death, but I'm right next to you. I'd get burnt if you did. Think about it."

Ginny wanted to give him a nasty look, but she didn't dare take her eyes off the dragon. "And why should I trust you?" she demanded.

Malfoy sighed. "Just get to work, Weasley," he said. "This should be close enough."

Though her heart raced with fear, Ginny went hot in the face. "Don't order me," she retorted. "I work for the Ministry, not for you."

"I've paid the Ministry to look after Mordor," Malfoy said smoothly. "I've financed this visit of yours. So *get to work*."

It was hard to reach out her hands—she didn't want to be any closer to that dragon than was absolutely necessary—but Ginny did it. She closed her eyes and hoped it wouldn't be the end of her. For a minute she was too frightened to do anything but sit there, but finally she focused with every

shred of her self-control, and to her shock, she connected. Norbert's aura was so powerful that she gasped.

"What?" Malfoy demanded.

Ginny ignored him. He didn't exist. She moved her hands through the great, warm barrier that was the dragon's natural shield. "That's beautiful," she murmured to herself.

"What?" Malfoy repeated, sounding even more irritated.

"We should check the eyes," Ginny answered, hanging on tightly to her tenuous connection with Norbert. "Is it safe to fly right in front of his face?"

Malfoy made an impatient noise, and flew directly before Norbert's snout. Ginny gulped anxiously and gazed into the dragon's yellow eyes, each of which was half as big as she was. But Norbert did not so much as snort as they approached, and Ginny felt oddly... safe. Slowly, she allowed Malfoy's energy to penetrate her senses again. She felt for his motives—searching for anticipation, for personal hatred, for intent to injure. When she sensed no danger, she closed off again—it was much easier this time—and opened up to Norbert. She concentrated, amazed at how simple it was for her to feel everything—her practice had really paid off.

"It's his eyes," she said aloud, when her palms skimmed across a troubled patch in the dragon's force field. Her fingers curled around tight, hot knots of energy, close to the corneas. "But it is physical," she mumbled to herself. "This is pain in the tissue. I thought they already had their eyes checked!"

"They did," Malfoy answered shortly.

"They need a more thorough examination," Ginny said. "I don't know how to fix this, but there's definitely a problem in his eyes—let me feel the rest of him and make sure it's just that."

Malfoy steered them around Norbert's enormous form; when they were directly over the dragon's harness, Ginny gasped.

"Stop—go lower."

Malfoy dropped into a hover over Norbert's back and Ginny shivered. It was cold here, right where Harry sat every day. Norbert's back ached—but this wasn't a muscular ache. This wasn't physical. This was almost like the waves she had felt from Harry, after his brushes with Dementors. This was like her *own* experience with Dementors, though, coming from the animal, it wasn't exactly emotional. And yet it *was*...

"Bizarre," she whispered. "It's in his back, but not in his tissue." Charlie had been right about the dragons after all. Ginny groaned inwardly at the idea of giving him more reasons to treat the beasts as if they were human... but it was amazing.

"Let her down, Malfoy."

Ginny's concentration broke at the sound of Harry's voice—she hadn't realized it, but she had expected him to come after her sooner. He was hovering alongside them, looking murderous, and Ginny felt a twinge of impatience.

"I'm fine, Harry," she began, but Harry didn't seem to hear her.

"I said land," he barked at Malfoy. His wand was out and his eyes flashed.

Malfoy gripped Ginny's waist, pulling her back against him. "She said she's fine, Potter," he drawled. "Get out of the way."

Ginny gasped and wrenched herself forward, but Malfoy didn't let go. Harry looked as if his head was about to explode; he raised his wand, and Ginny's heart fluttered at the open jealousy in his expression. She had never seen him look so much like Ron—like he might truly lose his temper. She was so strangely flattered that she didn't notice Norbert's head swinging towards them again until it was almost too late. The dragon's jaw opened wide and its teeth looked ready to snap Harry in two.

"DIVE!" Ginny screamed.

Harry dove. He flattened himself along his broom and just escaped being eaten—but not for long. Norbert let out a frightening, angry roar, and snapped at Harry again, while Ginny pulled her wand in a panic. She pointed it at Norbert but it was of no use—she had no idea what to do. Harry seemed to, however; he deflected an enormous jet of fire with what looked to be an invisible shield. A foot from his face, the fire met a wall and exploded before him.

"You'll have to land, Potter," Malfoy called out, sounding amused. "Seems you haven't got the right touch."

Harry maneuvered around the back of Norbert's head, but it was only a moment before the dragon twisted its neck and found him again. "Damn it!" he yelled in frustration. "Calm down!" But whatever he was doing with his wand meant nothing to Norbert, who was aggravated in the extreme.

"Land," Ginny begged, forgetting herself. "Go on, Harry, just land—don't hurt yourself."

He didn't listen.

"Land," Ginny ordered Malfoy, not bothering to hide her fear. Harry wouldn't go to the ground unless she did; she knew that. "Norbert's even worse now—" She cringed as a sheet of fire came at her, and screamed again at the sight of the dragon's head as it lunged for the broom.

Malfoy's body didn't even tense. He kept hold of Ginny with one hand and raised his wand with the other, deflecting the fire. He left his wand up for a long moment. As Ginny watched, Norbert calmed down and turned away again, suddenly docile. Harry hovered on the other side of the dragon, panting.

"What did you just do?" Harry yelled.

Ginny pulled Malfoy's hand from her stomach and threw it off.

Malfoy laughed, but didn't answer. In his energy, Ginny could feel a hot, thrilling sort of charge. *Power.*

"Why did you wait so long to do that?" Ginny demanded, trying to turn and face him. "Norbert could have *killed* Harry—"

"Like I care," Malfoy said, emphasizing each word.

Strangled with frustration, Ginny gave up. He was hopeless. She had to block him out, along with all his darkness, and ignore her own utter fright at being eye to eye with a meat-eating beast. She had to concentrate, regardless of Harry hovering in the air and Charlie shouting on the ground, and regardless of the fact that Malfoy's body was still touching hers. She was here to *work*. Ginny took a deep breath, gripped the broom with her knees and held out her hands, palms facing Norbert.

Malfoy grabbed her hard around the waist.

Ginny's concentration was instantly shattered. "Let go," she said furiously, squirming in his painful grasp. She caught Harry's eyes and the injured anger in his face made her feel guilty for no reason.

Malfoy was laughing again. "I'm not having some drama where you fall and have to be caught," he said quietly, pulling her tighter against him. "Don't flatter yourself that I get off on this..."

Ginny had the very distinct and disturbing feeling that he *did*—if only to torment Harry. Still, the very idea was disgusting and she realized that as long as she was on this broom with Malfoy, her concentration would be shot. She couldn't trust him—not now that he was on a mission to infuriate Harry. This wasn't going to work.

"Land," she said shortly. Malfoy didn't move the broom; Ginny pressed down on the nose but he was stronger and he held it in place. "Land," she said again, louder. "I'm finished for today."

"You haven't looked at Mordor."

"And I'm not going to until I have some proper working conditions. Take me down. Now."

Malfoy snorted. "Oh, I don't think so."

Harry flew up to Malfoy so that their brooms were nose to nose, and told him to land. He used several words that Ginny had rarely heard from him.

"Do you kiss your *mother* with that mouth, Potter?"

Ginny elbowed Malfoy in the gut. She didn't care that she was on his broom and at his mercy—feeling Malfoy's stomach contract and hearing him wheeze in pain was a satisfying victory. Ginny met Harry's eyes, and this time there was no anger in them. They shone fiercely at her.

"Come on," he muttered, pulling his broom alongside Malfoy's. Ginny didn't hesitate. She swung one leg over its handle, and pulled the other one off of Malfoy's broom before he had recovered enough to tighten his grip on her again. Harry clamped an arm around her and flew instantly higher, out of Malfoy's reach.

"Thanks."

Harry didn't answer but he moved his thumb against her stomach and rested his head against hers for a second. Before they landed, she could have sworn she'd felt his mouth on the back of her neck, even through her hair.

"Are you bloody insane?" Charlie was on top of her before they'd even dismounted. "What the—" Charlie's language was worse than Harry's and it took him longer to exhaust his colorful vocabulary.

When he'd finished, Ginny crossed her arms. "It's your fault for not taking me yourself," she hissed. "Dad's going to be really angry."

"You're damn right he is!" Charlie answered hotly. "With *you*! Getting on a broom with Malfoy after what we've bloody well—" And off he went again.

Ginny looked at Harry. "I'm going to take this off," she said, ignoring her brother, whose stream of curses had yet to die down. She tugged on her dragon vest. "Have a good shift, Charlie."

"*Shift*?" Charlie laughed. "Like I'm going anywhere other than Dad's office. He's going to know

about this right *now*. Besides, I don't have to fly for another four hours."

"Fine. Tell him I want a proper escort next time. And a pay raise."

"Oh you won't be getting a *pay* raise." Malfoy's voice was hard and cold. He'd landed silently beside them and held his broom clenched in his fist. His eyes were ice gray and fixed on Ginny. "I'll report this charade to the Secretary Privy, Weasley, and you'll be fired before the end of the day. I don't care who your father thinks he is."

Charlie took a dangerous step towards Malfoy, and Harry blocked him. "Don't," Harry said, very low. "Not worth it."

"I'll see *you* at the Ministry then," Charlie snapped at Malfoy. He pulled his wand and Disapparated without another word.

Harry and Malfoy looked at each other for a moment that seemed to last forever. Ginny finally touched Harry's arm, and he jumped. "Let's go," she said.

Harry nodded.

"How *sweet*," Malfoy drawled behind them as they turned and went to the equipment tent. "Seems you can't do anything without a Weasley, Potter. Predictable that you ended up f-"

"Shh, don't," Ginny whispered, grabbing Harry's arm to stop him from launching himself back at Malfoy. "Not worth it."

Harry's jaw tightened, but he kept moving forward, past the clearing where the dragons had landed earlier. New ones were taking off now; one strapping older man was disappearing out across the water atop a Welsh Green as another climbed into his harness. A woman was already circling the far side of the island atop her dragon.

They headed into the deserted equipment tent. Ginny watched, impressed, as the three reserve riders flew around the prison and wondered if she might be able to persuade the female rider to take her up in the air.

"I want to go up to the Ministry," Harry muttered. He tore off his fireproof clothes and threw them in a locker. "I want to back Charlie up."

"You want to tell my dad I shouldn't come back here?"

Harry glanced at her. "I just want to make sure Malfoy doesn't skew the story."

"Then go. I'm going too, but it'll take me longer. I have to go back to Stornoway and then travel by Floo powder."

"Want me to go with you?"

It was obvious that he hoped she would say no. Ginny finished putting her things away and shut her locker. "No. Go ahead."

Harry exhaled. "All right." He looked at her, and his green eyes studied hers. "I should've taken you up," he said.

Ginny hesitated. She hadn't had a chance yet to get irritated with Harry for everything that had just happened, and she was pretty sure that she wanted to. But he did sound sorry.

"But you saw how Norbert is with me," Harry went on. "He couldn't care less about spells. I..." Harry gave a frustrated laugh and looked away from her. "I don't know how Malfoy does it."

"Everyone has strengths." Ginny shrugged. "This must be his. Some people are just natural with dragons."

"Well I'm not." Harry looked defeated. He grabbed the bottom of his sweat-soaked T-shirt, glanced sideways at Ginny, and then yanked the T-shirt off so fast that he nearly lost his glasses. He fumbled to put on a clean one.

Ginny couldn't make herself look away. "True," she said soberly, watching him dress. "You're a real disappointment." Harry shot a frown at her before pulling on a jumper. "Oh, you're excellent with Defense Against the Dark Arts of course," Ginny continued, patting his arm when he got it into the sleeve, "and you're a brilliant Quidditch player. If only you were clever about dragons too, then perhaps everyone wouldn't think you were so useless." She feigned a sigh. "Such a pity you haven't got any talents."

He stared at her for a minute, and then a shy grin sneaked across his face. "Shut up."

Ginny grinned back. Harry had just leaned in and kissed her cheek, when a drawling voice made both their heads snap towards the door.

"Good *Lord*." Malfoy stood in the flap of the tent, unconcealed repulsion on his face. "Another breach of work ethics I'm sure the Secretary Privy will be thrilled to hear about." Malfoy went to his locker and tossed in his gear, and then swirled a heavy cloak around his shoulders. He clasped it shut. "I do hope that my report doesn't get you both *sacked*." With a twist of his wand, he was gone.

Ginny and Harry turned back to each other.

"There really isn't supposed to be dating, you know," said Harry, sounding a bit worried. "I think I signed something about that."

"Oh for heaven's sake, Harry," Ginny said with a snort. "We're not going to be sacked. Just go on and make sure Charlie doesn't act like an idiot, and I'll be there in a minute."

He went.

Alone in the tent, Ginny sat on a bench and looked around the place again. The dragon-riding world did not seem so impressive now as it had an hour ago; Ginny narrowed her eyes at a locker that bore the initials C.W. Charlie was being horrible. If he didn't want her getting help from Malfoy, then *he* should have helped her—she'd expected him to help her. Short of that, it would have been nice to have Harry's support, although, after last night, she hadn't been expecting it.

Ginny fought down a pang of real anger at Harry. He only wanted her to be safe. She shut her eyes and reminded herself that there had been a time when she had wished and dreamed that Harry Potter would care about her, and now he did. That was a good thing. But he was being selfish—he wanted her safe, but she wanted to work. He wasn't even trying to see what she wanted. And did he really expect her to stay home, when she had this opportunity to help? And she could help, she knew it. At least she could connect with the dragons. A few minutes with Norbert's energy had told her that.

She picked up her broom and hoped she'd remember the way back to Stornaway. Rain fell hard on the roof of the tent, but Ginny didn't care how wet she was going to get; she had to get to Diagon Alley. There were a few facts of which she wanted to make the Minister aware.

* * * * *

By the time Harry got to the top floor of the Ministry, shouting voices carried clearly out of Mr. Weasley's office and filled the stone corridor.

"And then he grabbed Ginny and wouldn't let her down—"

"This isn't a *personal* argument, Weasley. She acted of her own free will—"

Harry hurried to the office door and Lawrence let him in without a word. Mr. Weasley sat well back from his desk, looking from Charlie to Malfoy with obvious confusion on his face. When he saw Harry, he looked relieved. "Harry, come in. Will you explain what—"

"I'm telling you, Dad, it's not going to work! And I don't care what the hell Rose Brown says, and I'll tell her when she gets here that she's crazy if she thinks she and her Privy Council are going to convince me to risk the personal safety of—"

Malfoy fell into a chair and drummed his fingers in a bored fashion. He glanced at Harry. "Going to be an impartial witness, Potter, or are you here to do the innocent act?" he sneered softly behind Charlie's back, as Charlie continued to shout.

Harry gritted his teeth and looked away. He could still see the perverse smile Malfoy had flashed when he'd grabbed Ginny's waist and yanked her back into him. Sick bastard.

"Charlie—CHARLIE!" Mr. Weasley stood.

Panting, Charlie backed up and flopped into the chair beside Malfoy's. "Fine," he snapped. "Don't listen to me."

"I'm listening," Mr. Weasley said gravely, "but I need the story straight. Just details. Harry?" He sat down again.

"One minute—" The Secretary Privy swept in, pushing her glasses up with a prim finger and slapping down her clipboard. "I need to hear this." She stood at the edge of the Minister's desk and crossed her arms. "Harry?"

Harry looked from Malfoy's expectant sneer to Charlie's flushed and angry face, and tried to remember how it had started. "Ginny got there," he said, "and told us she'd have to get really close to the dragons in order to help them. She asked Charlie to stun—"

"Which we *can't*," Charlie interrupted, "or they'd be—"

"Charlie." Mr. Weasley gave him an exasperated look and glanced back at Harry. "Go on."

"She asked Charlie to stun the dragons so she could work on them, and Charlie said he couldn't."

"Why not?" Rose Brown demanded.

Charlie made a noise of pure frustration. "I just tried to TELL YOU—"

"Because they have to eat," Harry interrupted. "They have to hydrate, and then they have to get a proper night's rest or they'll be no good to us by morning. They can't do any of those things if they're Stunned."

Mr. Weasley nodded. "So then?"

"So then Ginny said she wanted one of us to take her closer." Harry felt Malfoy's eyes on him and made himself continue. "But Charlie and I didn't think that was a good idea."

"Why not?" Rose demanded once more.

"Because dragons BREATHE FIRE, for a start, Rose," Charlie shouted.

"You fly on them all day, don't you?" Rose snapped, sounding very like Ginny.

Harry sighed. "That's different," he told Mr. Weasley, hoping that at least one person would see the difference as he did. "We're on them all day, yes—on their backs. We're armed with spells that make it possible to deflect fire. We're in harnesses, which makes it much more difficult to get thrown than if we were on brooms—"

"I was thrown," said Malfoy.

"Mick was thrown," said Rose at the same time. "That is, Mr. O'Malley. And Mr. Malfoy—and Mr. Krum."

"I know that." Harry kept his eyes on Mr. Weasley's; this was his chance to make him see that sending Ginny up to Azkaban to fly near those dragons was ludicrous. "So think about how much easier it is to be thrown off a broom if you *don't* have a harness. She wanted to be flown right up to their heads, but no one can do that, those dragons..."

"They're mad, Dad," Charlie put in. "Bonkers, the lot. Viking nearly took Mick's head off today with his tail—"

Rose gasped. "Have you brought in the replacement dragons?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, but there're only two. They go in for Viktor Krum's ride. And Cho Chang's." Charlie looked at her stubbornly. "Mick can handle Viking, he's been riding him for two years."

"And I," said Malfoy coolly, rising from his chair and coming to stand beside Harry, "have had Mordor since childhood. Ability with the animals is not the issue—I have a *gift*." He tossed his pale hair and Harry felt a stab of annoyance. "Yet my dragon suffers. These conditions are unheard of, Weasley," he leveled his glare across the Minister's desk. "If you're going to play Minister, then at least *attempt* to stay impartial. If the Healer has no business being near the dragons, then *you* must find another solution. "

Malfoy sounded uncannily like his father, and Harry got a chill.

"The Healer," said Mr. Weasley very quietly, "is my daughter."

"A fact that bears little importance here." Malfoy looked at Rose. "Privy Brown?"

She glanced at Arthur. "That's true," she said, and looked back at Harry. "Did anything else happen?"

"Why yes it did," Malfoy began, before Harry could answer. "My part in the affair has been rather conveniently left out. After these two refused to take the Healer up to do her job, and seeing that she was incapable of going on her own, I took her myself."

Arthur Weasley worked his jaw and his fingers gripped the edge of his desk. Harry knew just how he felt. "Yourself?" Mr. Weasley repeated. "On your broom?"

"That's right."

"Charlie?" Mr. Weasley pinned his son with his eyes. "This is what happened?"

"She got on of her own free will," Malfoy said for the second time. "And she might have got some work done if the hero here—" he jabbed a thumb at Harry, "—hadn't interrupted our flight. Apparently I'm not to *touch* the Healer." Malfoy smirked. "Apparently it's *Potter's* job to molest her in the equipment tents, after hours."

Harry's face burned. "Shut your mouth, Malfoy. Mr. Weasley—"

"Calm down, Harry. Is that the end of the story, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Nearly. Potter took the Healer off of my broom and down to the ground—"

"She was *fighting* to get down! She told you to *land*!"

"And nothing was accomplished," Malfoy finished. "It was a waste of time, effort, and money. Mine."

No one had time to answer. The office door opened and Ginny stumbled through it, soaking wet and clutching her broom. "It's really chucking it down out there—what'd I miss?"

"Ginny, are you all right?" Mr. Weasley shot out of his chair and nearly pushed past Rose.

Ginny took a step back. "Of course I am, why wouldn't I be?" she snapped. "It's only rain."

"But with the dragons—with what happened—"

Malfoy gave a martyred sigh.

"We're discussing your usefulness at Azkaban, Miss Weasley," said Rose, picking up her clipboard and scribbling something. "Tell me, did you have a chance to do any work at all?"

"Not really." Ginny shoved her wet hair out of her face, pulled her wand and pointed it at her robes. "*Sicco*." She did the same thing to her hair. "Bloody rain. Anyway, no—I worked with Norbert for a few minutes, but I have no idea what's going on. I didn't get to stay in the air."

She looked really irritated. Harry watched her and tried to work out what was wrong. Perhaps the flight in the rain had put her in a bad mood; she hadn't been so angry when they'd been at Azkaban.

"Did you *want* to stay in the air, Ginny?" Mr. Weasley asked, adjusting his glasses and peering at her.

"Well—" Ginny glanced at Harry, then past him, at Malfoy. "Well, yes, actually, I did."

Harry's eyebrows shot up.

Malfoy laughed softly and sank back into his chair.

"I thought you wanted to get down," Harry said, turning to the door. Ginny stood against it with her arms crossed.

"Once you came up there I *had* to get down," she said, and looked at her father. "Norbert tried to kill Harry every time he flew close. It's terrible."

"Just Mr. Potter?" asked Rose. "What about Mr. Malfoy—did the dragon threaten him as well?"

Harry gave Ginny a warning look but she ignored him and answered Rose. "The dragon was not as aggressive towards Mr. Malfoy."

"It didn't attack him?"

"Not... until Harry came up."

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Miss Weasley." Rose tapped the nib of her quill on her clipboard. "If you were in the air with Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Potter's presence disturbed your process, then why didn't Mr. Potter simply land?"

Ginny looked dead at Harry, and he knew it was his answer to give. But he couldn't.

"Oh well, he's terribly *valiant*, you see," said Malfoy, sounding delighted. "He couldn't leave the girlfriend in the air with *me*, could he? Had to rescue her from my clutches." Malfoy laughed. "He refused to land until I had put her on the ground."

"Mr. Potter, is this true?" Rose asked incredulously. "Work is neither the time nor place—"

"To be fair," Ginny cut in, "Malfoy wouldn't put me on the ground when I asked. Harry thought I was in danger."

"But up until that point?" Rose insisted. "You said you *did* work for about a minute?"

"Yes. I did." Ginny refused to look at Harry now. "If I had a proper escort, I could really be of service."

"And how is Mr. Malfoy not a proper escort?"

Harry wanted to throw something heavy at Rose Brown. Was she being intentionally thick? She had to know that Draco Malfoy was a useless liar who couldn't be trusted.

"He..." Ginny looked extremely uncomfortable. "I suppose he..." She shot another glance over Harry's shoulder that deeply unsettled him—she was looking at Malfoy for answers? Harry had to look away. "He already has a job, doesn't he?" Ginny finished lamely. "He can hardly do two. But he did seem... at ease with the dragons, so if there's someone else like that in Romania, Charlie? Or someone that you know of who can get close to the dragons with me and—"

"There's no budget for it," Rose interrupted. "The Privy Council won't move another Galleon to this operation as long as it continues to malfunction; that's been made clear. Riders falling right and left—what's the point of sinking more money into it? It seems a waste to them. They're far more interested in devising another method of keeping the Dementors on the island than in continuing this—"

"Then EXPLAIN it to them better," Charlie snarled. "And no, Ginny, there isn't anyone I'd trust on a broom with you next to a dragon's head, not even me—and NOT—" Charlie pointed at Malfoy. "HIM."

"Mr. Weasley, kindly lower your voice," Rose hissed. "First of all, there will be no new escort, and there will be no more money. Secondly, I suggest you maintain a level of respect for your peers in this Ministry, and leave your personal feelings at home."

Charlie seethed.

"Thirdly, you would be *fortunate* to have Mr. Malfoy's help in this matter. Miss Weasley is quite right; he had no obligation to assist her today, and I certainly wouldn't expect him to continue, especially since it seems that the investment he has made to bring Miss Weasley here has been a fruitless one."

The smug noise that followed Rose's comments was enough to turn Harry's stomach. That anyone could consider, even for a second, putting Ginny on a broom with Malfoy, seemed to Harry a terrible crime.

Ginny, however, didn't seem to think it was. She was regarding Rose Brown with respect, and

wouldn't return Harry's attempts to catch her eye.

Mr. Weasley returned to his desk and sagged into his chair. He looked up at Harry and shook his head. "This leaves us nowhere. We can't stun the dragons, we can't replace the dragons, and now we have a Healer, but no escort."

"No one's asked me."

Harry's stomach dropped into his feet. He looked at Malfoy, whose face had twisted with some sick pleasure.

"I won't make another donation to this department until my dragon's condition is remedied," Malfoy said, curling and uncurling his fingers on the arms of the chair and keeping his eyes on Harry's. "But I'll escort the Healer." He smiled widely. "It's the least I can do."

Harry had heard about seeing red, but this was the first time it had ever happened to him. He wanted to hex Malfoy or, better yet, punch him right in the face.

"Charlie-Harry!" A voice in the door distracted Harry; Mick O'Malley had run into the Minister's office, panting and beaming. He looked around and grinned. "Minister Weasley, Privy Brown—" He turned to Ginny. "What did you *do* up there? I didn't think you had the time to get your work done."

Ginny looked surprised. "I didn't. Why?"

"Because I've just come from checking up on Norbert and he's eating like a—well, like a dragon. It's the first time in a month I've seen him finish a meal."

"He's looking better?" Charlie said eagerly.

"No," Mick admitted. "But at least he's eating."

"And that's your doing, Ginny?" Rose Brown asked, raising her eyebrows and picking up her clipboard.

Ginny's eyes flickered to Harry, and away again. "I suppose it might be. I only had a minute, but I did get into his aura, so..."

"It must've been you, Ginny," said Mick. "Will you keep working—will you have a look at Viking?"

"I... Dad, I really want to." Ginny looked at her father, obviously torn, but Harry couldn't feel sorry for her. "Please."

Mr. Weasley looked very tired. "And you'd... be willing to escort her, Mr. Malfoy?"

Malfoy stood. "Oh yes." He sounded amused. "I'll have to cut down my flights, of course. I don't plan to be at Azkaban for more than ten hours a day."

"Wait—what?" Mick looked from Mr. Weasley to Malfoy. "*He's* going to escort—"

"Yes, Mr. O'Malley, you missed that bit." Rose scribbled on her clipboard and pointed to Charlie with her quill. "Can the reserve schedules be adjusted to make up for Mr. Malfoy's flights?"

Charlie nodded, looking as tired as his father, and as angry as Harry felt.

"Well then, it's settled!" But Rose was alone in her enthusiasm. Everyone else in the office was silent.

"Yes." Mr. Weasley said eventually. "It seems it is. If you would all excuse me—I'd like a moment with Ginny to discuss her schoolwork."

Everyone filed out but Harry, who didn't want to leave. He felt he deserved a moment alone with Ginny too. Right now. But he couldn't say anything in front of Mr. Weasley and he wasn't sure what he had to say to Ginny anyway. She wasn't even looking at him.

"Go and get some sleep, Harry," Mr. Weasley said. "You'll see each other tomorrow."

Glad for the direction, Harry left the Ministry and Apparated directly to his bedroom, suddenly wanting nothing more than to be unconscious.

— CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO —

Black and Potter

Harry was ready. He'd been thinking about it for months, trying to decide what he really wanted to do with the opportunity, but he had thrown away idea after idea. He wanted to do something fun. Something funny. Something not too cruel, and not too illegal. He wanted to do something that he knew Sirius would appreciate, and it had to be something that they could do together. But most of all, he wanted to do something that he could imagine his father doing, and had dismissed most of his ideas as unworthy of Prongs. He hadn't known his dad, but the pictures, the Kinolia, the story about the Dursleys, and the Marauder's Map—not to mention the fact that he'd been an unregistered Animagus—had given Harry a very clear idea of what he had to live up to.

Harry landed Norbert, relieved that his shift was over. Sirius had said he'd go with Harry whenever he was ready, and so tonight was the night. It was a Friday, and Harry felt strangely energized—perhaps because his preoccupation with the evening's activities had kept him from sinking too far into the echoes of the past.

It wasn't until he saw Ginny, dismounting from Draco Malfoy's broom, that he felt a pang of real nausea. It just wasn't right that they had to ride the same broom, but, as Ginny had patiently explained to him at least ten times now, when she tried to fly her own broom, the dragons sensed her as a separate entity and tried to attack. When she was right beside Draco, on the other hand, she claimed that she was much safer. Harry almost hated that more, but he knew two things: the dragons really were getting better, and Ginny really didn't want to be on that broom with Draco Malfoy. As long as those things were true, Harry supposed he couldn't rightfully get as angry as he wanted to get—and he wanted to get furious.

Secretly, he *was* furious. But it wouldn't do to say as much to Ginny. The terse conversation they'd had after the last Ministry meeting had been enough to shut Harry's mouth for a while. He could still hear the hurt in Ginny's voice.

"After everything you've seen me do, can't you trust me just a little? I know you don't want me hurt, but Harry, come on. Think of all the dangerous things you've done—that you had to do—can't you see I have to do this? Not just for you, but for Charlie, and Dad, and—well, everyone. What if another Dementor gets off that island because the dragons aren't performing? What if I can make sure that doesn't happen? Don't you think I ought to try? I know Malfoy's a prat, but can you honestly tell me I should let him stop me from doing what's right?"

That had stumped him. She was right. Still, every day for the last four weeks, Malfoy had left his shift two hours early, to be replaced by Lisa. Every day, Harry had been forced to watch Malfoy leer at him before flying to work with Ginny. There was nothing to be done about it, and being around the Dementors only made Harry's imagination worse—he couldn't stop dwelling, and the sick visions that came into his head were relentless.

Quickly he unstrapped his harness, grabbed the Firebolt and flew to the ground. He strode over to Ginny and took her elbow. "Hey." He kissed her cheek, ignoring Malfoy's smirk.

"Possessive Potter. Well, that's always been the dream, hasn't it, Weasley?" Malfoy laughed.

Harry fought the urge to answer, and steered Ginny away, toward the equipment tent. She looked worn out. "How're you feeling?"

She shrugged, then cringed as Malfoy called after them: "Weasley, we'll be working on *my* dragon, on Monday, so mind you get a proper rest this weekend. *Do* try not to shag yourself sick."

"Right, that's it—" Harry turned on Malfoy.

"Don't." Ginny caught his arm. "Please. It's bad enough."

Harry let her drag him, still muttering, into the tent. "How can you stand it?" he demanded. "Is he like that all day? How can you keep on doing this?"

Ginny sighed and put her things into her locker. "I don't know," she said. She shut the locker

and leaned her forehead against it. "He's horrible."

"What did he do to you?" Harry threw his things into his locker and slammed it.

"Nothing... not like that. Just... horrible." She straightened up. "I can feel his energy," she said dully. "I open up to the dragons and I can feel him too, because he's right there. And he's the worst thing I've ever felt."

Harry stared at her. It hadn't occurred to him that Ginny would be able to feel Malfoy in the same way that she could feel everyone else. Perhaps because he didn't seem human enough. "Worse than Sirius?" was all he could think of to say.

"Well, I don't open up around Sirius." Ginny laughed. "I'm not suicidal. Never mind, Harry, don't think about it. I'll find a way to sort it out. Let's just go home—can you come over tonight?"

"Only for a minute. I've got plans with Sirius."

Ginny looked surprised, but pleased. "Oh, have you? What?"

Harry opened his mouth to tell her, and then remembered that he couldn't. He wondered if his mum had ever caught his dad off guard like that. He closed his mouth and tugged on the bottom of Ginny's jumper.

"Harry?" She looked perplexed. "Can't you tell me?"

He laughed softly through his nose. Sirius had said to say *nothing*. Harry stepped closer and gave Ginny a quick kiss. "See you later, all right?" he mumbled, and stepped back.

"Harry—"

But he Disapparated. "Get my owl?" he asked, when he found himself in the front room of Lupin Lodge, looking at a grinning Sirius, who was dressed in jeans and a Muggle coat, and had his hair combed. Harry had never seen him look so regular. It was bizarre.

"Oh yes. Got out my old Invisibility Cloak, and I'm ready whenever you are."

"You've got an—"

"Well, once we were fully grown, we could hardly fit under the same one, could we? And we were hardly finished playing pranks. Go on, get your things. And remember—not a *word*, Harry. Not a word. I'll meet you at the Notch."

Harry nodded and Apparated again—into his own bedroom, this time. He tore off his work clothes and put on unobtrusive Muggle outfit, like the one Sirius was wearing. He couldn't stop grinning. This was how his dad had used to be. This was how they'd *all* used to be. Normal. He stuck his wand under his coat, into the belt of his jeans, and tried to think if he needed anything else in order to torment the Dursleys.

No, not torment, Harry reminded himself sternly. *Not torment. Just annoy*. He didn't want to do anything that smacked of Muggle torture—not even to the Dursleys. But they'd had it coming for quite some time, and Harry was going to give them a taste—just a little taste—of what it felt like to live in a house where they didn't belong. He'd lived seventeen years in that house and had often wished that he could talk back just a little, annoy them just once, play a really good trick on them and feel vindicated. Just his being there, of course, had been enough to annoy them, and every once in awhile, he *had* lost his temper and his magical control, and he supposed that those few incidents could count as his revenge. But he'd never really had a chance to get them back. And it had been a while since he'd seen Privet Drive. Harry wondered if even a shingle had changed in the entire neighborhood, and laughed; he knew it hadn't. He lifted the Invisibility Cloak from his school trunk, where all his best possessions were still kept, and went into the front room to wait for Sirius.

The room was dim and still; the kitchen clock ticked too loudly, and Harry had the immediate, uncomfortable awareness that he was not alone. The hair stood up on the back of his neck, and, on instinct, he rested his hand on his wand. Slowly, he scanned the fireplace. The windows. The shadowy corners. His eyes lingered on the trick bookcase, which he and Ron had recently discovered led to a passage in the wall and an underground safety chamber—old Mr. Archibald had probably been suspicious of Martin Lewis, they'd decided, and rightfully so. But the bookcase didn't move, and there was not a sound in the room. Harry turned to look behind him.

"*HAH!*"

Not two inches from Harry's face, Sirius tore off his own Invisibility Cloak and appeared with such suddenness and noise that Harry yelped. He stumbled away and whirled to face Sirius, wand at the ready.

Sirius's eyes crinkled and he bellowed with laughter. "Your—face—" he gasped.

Harry breathed hard and his heart raced. "Psychopath!" he shot, shoving his wand back into his belt. He didn't know whether to laugh that he'd been tricked, or to punch Sirius for terrifying him.

"Many have said so," Sirius said, still laughing. He wagged his eyebrows. "Are you ready?"

"When I can *breathe* again, I will be."

"Ah, Harry." Sirius breathed a deep, satisfied sigh. "You're too much." He shook his cloak out, and prepared to swing it back over his shoulders. "Your woman says hello, by the way."

Harry grew very warm. "My what?"

Sirius grinned. "She said you left her quite rudely, and you're in a world of trouble."

Harry's heart gave a frantic knock. "I am?"

"Mmm. You've got yourself a demanding girl, wanted to know exactly what was going on." Sirius swirled the cloak over his head and disappeared again. "I told her," said his disembodied and rather dramatic voice, "that there are some mysteries too awesome to comprehend."

Harry snorted.

"That's exactly what *she* said, Harry, and then she went banging round the room with her silver ladle, splashing Wolfsbane Potion all about..." Sirius's head appeared in midair and his expression grew earnest. "It's wonderful, what she does for Remus. I don't think she really comprehends—you know it's a blue moon, on Sunday? A double month. And Moony's completely at ease, I've never seen..." Sirius smiled a bit, keeping his eyes on Harry. "Ginny's great."

Harry grew hotter and had an urge to pull his own cloak over his face. "Well don't tell me," he mumbled. "Tell *her*."

"I often do." Sirius smiled wider, and his eyes glinted. "Going to work must be a bit nicer lately, eh, Harry?"

Harry wasn't sure that he could stand much more teasing; he unfolded the cloak in his hands and, this time, he got under it. "Yeah, right," he said, sarcasm getting the better of him now that he knew he was invisible. "I'm so glad she's up there getting fire shot in her face. It's fantastic. The best part's seeing Malfoy put his filthy hands all over her." Harry's chest burned with irrational jealousy. "*That's* a real treat, let me tell you."

Sirius studied the area where Harry stood. "Come out from under there, if you want to talk about it."

"No thanks," Harry muttered. "I don't even want to think about it."

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "Well... we could always mess with Malfoy tonight... I know I said we shouldn't, and it *would* be dangerous, but under the circumstances—"

"No," Harry said flatly. "If I go near him, I'll kill him."

Sirius barked a laugh. "Between you and Ron, it's a wonder Malfoy made it through school alive."

"I could say the same about you and Snape," Harry returned.

Sirius looked pleased. "Why, yes you could, Harry." He pulled his cloak up over his head and disappeared. "Yes you could. And if he were alive, by Merlin, our next Black and Potter mission would be to his house." Sirius paused. "He turned out all right in the end, the greasy git," said his bodiless voice, almost fondly. "Right—shall we go?"

Harry hesitated as guilt crept into the back of his mind. "Are you sure we should do this?" he asked for the hundredth time. "It's against wizard law. We're not supposed to enter Muggle homes using magic, it's—"

"Harry, believe me. This is *nothing*."

"Nothing?" Harry frowned, paranoid. "This isn't a good enough operation, is it?"

"It's good," Sirius assured him. "But it's nothing to worry about."

Harry wasn't sure he believed Sirius on either count, but it was time to go and he wanted to see it through. "You know how to get there?" he asked.

"Number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey—know it like the back of my hand, Harry. I've been there before, not that you'd remember. I was rather shorter and much shaggier, whenever I went."

The *Grim*. Third year. Harry laughed out loud. "You visited me at the Dursleys!" he said, delighted. He had completely forgotten.

"More times than was safe," said Sirius, and something in his voice made Harry's chest swell. This was good. This was... cool. He had a godfather.

"All right then," said Harry, and concentrated hard on a house that he couldn't believe he was going to visit on purpose. "See you there."

* * * * *

"Hello?" Hermione stood in the front room at the Notch, hoping that Ron would be there. Ron and Harry, really. She needed both of them. "Hello," she called, "are you two home? Are you decent?"

But the house was silent except for a muffled hoot from Hedwig and the manic flutterings of Pig, who zoomed into the room to greet her. He perched on her shoulder and rubbed his head against her temple.

"Hi," Hermione said softly, and stroked his fluffy wing. "Where's your dad?"

Pig hooted.

"Unfortunately, I don't speak Owlsh. But I'll work on it." Hermione walked back to Harry's room and knocked. "Harry?" She pushed the door open a little, but the room was dark. Pig left her shoulder and flew in to hassle Hedwig, and Hermione went to Ron's room and peeked in. The room was spotless, the bed made and the lamp low—she had to smile. He'd been keeping things tidy and ready, ever since the first night. He seemed to think it made her visits more likely. She supposed she ought to keep letting him think that; it wouldn't do to have him know that she'd sleep here with him even if it were a horrendous wreck.

She went in, closed the door behind her, and lay down on Ron's bed to wait for him. He should have been finished with work an hour ago, and she needed him to come home now and tell her that everything would sort itself out. He was so good at convincing her that things would be all right, even at moments like this when she knew they really wouldn't.

Hermione stretched out on her stomach and shut her eyes. She was tired. Frustrated. In four weeks, she had made next to no progress on the Imprisonment Enchantment. She'd been more of a help to Penny as an organizer of notes and recorder of new plans than as a Thinker, and she could tell, though Penny was terribly nice, that she was also a bit disappointed. Thinkers were supposed to take painstaking research like Penelope's and to distill it so that it could be channeled for magical use. But Hermione's only bright idea so far had been to look for a professional Charmer, and though they expected the Charmer on Monday, Hermione feared there wouldn't be anything to Charm. All the sitting cross-legged in the world hadn't brought her any closer to a solution.

She hadn't even *tried* to meditate about her parents, though she visited them nearly every day, in an effort to finally accept their condition. *Acceptance of the truth*, Delia had told her, *will lead to clarity of thought*. Hermione didn't know what stopped her from accepting the truth. It didn't make sense not to accept it—it wasn't as if her parents had responded at all, in two years. It wasn't as if she couldn't see them lying there, getting thinner and grayer and less human all the time. She tried to quell the irrational bit of her mind that expected them to wake, but it reared its head on every visit. Even after all this time, that hope hadn't died.

A soft knock at the door relieved Hermione's thoughts. Ron was home. Ron would make it all seem a little further away. "I'm in here," she said.

"Oh!" said a voice that wasn't Ron's at all. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt—"

"Ginny!" Hermione rolled over and sat up. "No, I'm in here by myself, come in."

Ginny pushed the door open, looking rather sheepish. "Sorry, I just assumed." She looked at the door. "Harry let the charm wear off," she said, and tutted her tongue. "I shouldn't've been able to hear you. I told him he'd have to refresh it every two weeks. Serves him right if he starts having nightmares."

Hermione flushed. "Ginny!"

"Well?" She laughed. "Where is Harry, anyway? Do *you* know what he's up to?"

"Up to? No." Hermione got off the bed, feeling rather strange about lounging around in Ron's room, in front of his sister, even if it was just Ginny. "Is he up to something?"

"Yes, with Sirius. But they won't tell me what, so I came over to spy. Did he say where he was going?"

"He was gone before I got here—do you know where *Ron* is?"

"He's not back from work?"

Hermione shook her head.

"Then perhaps he's in on it, whatever it is." Ginny pursed her lips. "Let's just make tea here, and wait for them."

"All right," said Hermione, liking the idea of hanging about the boys' house while they were away. Together, she and Ginny went into the little kitchen. By the time Hermione had got the water going, Ginny had started soup in the cauldron that sat in the cramped fireplace; it stirred itself while she poured broth onto it, straight from her wand. Hermione stared. "That's elaborate," she said, wishing again that she knew how to cook.

Ginny shrugged. "It's just soup—here, do you want to learn it? I'll show you."

Hermione made several attempts before the broth was edible, but eventually she got the hang of it, and stirred away as Ginny got the vegetables sorted. She glanced over when Ginny made a sound of disgust, and saw her throw an onion into the bin.

"What?" Hermione leaned over the bin and looked at it. It looked fine to her.

"It's gone rotten on the inside, it must be months old."

"It doesn't look rotten."

Ginny shrugged again. "I can just tell, with plants," she said.

Hermione glanced at Ginny and wondered if it was fair to bring up what she'd been wondering about for four weeks, ever since she had discovered that her friend was a Healer. She knew that Ginny was occupied with school, and doubly busy with the dragons, and that she'd been brewing the Wolfsbane Potion all week for the second time in a month. She looked a bit tired, really—perhaps it would be best to put things off until the summer. Although, by the summer, her parents' condition would be so horrible that Hermione didn't even want to think about it. She *had* to say something now.

"What is it?" Ginny asked, and Hermione jumped, making broth splash into the fire.

"Wh—what?"

"Do you want to ask me something?"

"Well—yes—but don't *do* that!" Hermione had to catch her breath. "It's very startling."

Ginny smiled wanly. "Sorry." She dumped the rest of the vegetables into the kettle. "Put about two more cups of broth in that, if you don't mind," she said, and peered into a small brown sack. "You know, I'm shocked that they *buy* vegetables," she muttered, and dumped potatoes into the sink.

Hermione watched her scrub them. "But erm... since you asked," she began hesitantly. "I don't want to put any pressure on you, but..."

Ginny glanced at her, and went back to the potatoes. "Just ask me," she said quietly, and Hermione got the feeling that Ginny already knew what was coming.

"It's my parents."

Ginny nodded. "Did you visit them today?"

"Yes." Hermione stopped the broth and put her wand back in her belt. She watched the soup churn itself. "I'm not going to be able to help them in time," she said. "I don't mean to be a pessimist, but they look worse every day, and I can't do anything—and I don't know if *you* can, but..."

Ginny set the potatoes on the worktop and waved her wand over them; they fell into perfect slices. She dumped them into a big pan with a good bit of oil, then sent the whole thing to hover in the fire beside the cauldron. "I don't know either," she said, and met Hermione's eyes. "I can't promise anything, but I want to try—I've always wanted to try. I just wasn't ready."

Hermione's heart beat painfully. "But you... are now?"

"I don't know." Ginny rubbed her head. "The dragons are really giving me a workout."

"I'm sure." Hermione tried to think about something other than her parents. "I think it's fascinating, what you're discovering."

And it was. Ginny had suggested, after several days working over the dragons' backs, that it was the riders themselves who were having an effect on the beasts' behavior. The riders, when affected by the Dementors, seemed capable of affecting their dragons by proxy, and the worse the riders were affected, the harder they were on their dragons. The theory certainly accounted for Norbert's terrible behavior, though it didn't quite explain why Mick O'Malley, who seemed such an optimist, would have caused his dragon to throw him off. Perhaps he had dark secrets in his soul. Hermione said as much to Ginny.

She laughed a little. "Somehow I doubt it. But it really is interesting. Their eyes are easy enough to explain—"

"That's a dragon's weakest point."

"Right, and the exposure to so much defensive magic, not to mention the Dementors and the weather conditions, just takes a natural toll. The emotional side of it is what's so strange. They're so impressionable, dragons—fragile, really—and yet they're so *big*. I love their energy, I wish you could feel it. It's like sea. A big sea of warm tingles or something, when it's all good and healthy. I don't know, I can't explain it." Ginny flicked her wand, and the fire lowered slightly. "But it's great practice, and I'm lucky to be getting it so soon. I can't help but get stronger when I work on them every day. And I've got Malfoy sitting right behind me, so I've got all his emotion to manage—and all his comments—he's such a nasty bastard, honestly, I should have let Harry break him in half, don't know why I stopped him." Ginny blew out an angry breath and leaned against the worktop.

"Malfoy?" It chilled Hermione to realize what Ginny must have to endure when she was near him. She hadn't even thought about it. "You can feel *him*?"

"Can I." Ginny flicked her wand at the fireplace. The potatoes rose into the air, rotated, and fell back into the pan with a sizzle. "It's fine, though," she said mechanically. "It's good for me."

"How?"

"Well, I'm building up a tolerance. It's all good practice, even if it feels like someone's got my insides in a vise and—" She stopped and shook her head. "Never mind—can't complain, can I?" She

sighed impatiently. "Harry's with Dementors every day and *he* never does. I wish he would. Then I could feel like less of a whinger when *I* want to do it."

Hermione had to laugh. "Complain all you like," she said. "Harry's not here."

"No, he's off being secretive." Ginny flicked her wand again and the fire lowered to a simmering flame. "And do you want to know something really stupid? He's jealous of Malfoy."

Hermione's eyebrows shot up. "Why?"

"Because he's an idiot." But Ginny looked guilty at once. "I didn't mean that." She put down her wand, put her hands over her face, and rubbed her eyes. "I'm just tired. I'm really glad he's out with Sirius, I think it's good if they have secrets, I just wanted to be around Harry tonight." She sighed. "Not that it's been easy lately. I've been so open, after working with the dragons, and *he's* always so..."

Hermione didn't need an explanation. "He never did well with Dementors."

"No. *That's* the whole problem. I know he doesn't think anything of me and Malfoy—it's just those Dementors, they get to his mind, and he can't help that. But he refuses to say what's *on* his mind, and I can't help *him*." Ginny kept her hands over her face. "Why couldn't he have played Quidditch?" she said morosely, through her fingers.

Hermione smiled. "Well... he's Harry."

"I know." Ginny took her hands down. "He always takes the high road, and I really do love that, but sometimes I wish..." She trailed off. "How can I love the same things that drive me mad?"

"You're asking the wrong person," Hermione replied. She and Ginny studied each other for a moment, and then they laughed.

"I'm being an idiot," Ginny said, and reached out. "Tell me to shut up."

Hermione hugged her, spoon in hand. "No."

"I'll visit your parents tomorrow," soothed Ginny, hugging Hermione tighter. "All right?"

Hermione shut her eyes and nodded. She couldn't allow herself to hope—not yet. She knew that. But hope had already crept in, unbidden, and it was so strong that her whole body ached with it.

"Aw—would you look at that, Pig?"

Hermione's eyes snapped open and she looked over Ginny's shoulder at Ron, who stood in the doorway with Pig on his head, regarding the two of them.

"My two favorite girls, cooking me dinner. Just what a bloke wants to see after a long day at work."

"Oh, shut your face," said Hermione, but she had already let go of Ginny to get a hug from Ron. He looked stupid and cute, with Pig on his head, and he smelled wonderful and warm. She buried herself in his arms for a long moment. "Where were you?"

"Working late."

"No you weren't," Ginny said briskly. "Sirius was home an hour and a half ago, and he said you'd both called it an early night. You're up to something, just like Harry."

Hermione pulled back and looked up at Ron's face. Pig's round eyes blinked down at her from atop his head, making it hard to think serious thoughts, but if Ron had lied... "Is that true?" she asked slowly.

Ron gave Ginny a dirty look. He swiped Pig off his head, then caught Hermione's eyes and shifted a little. "I was just..." He stalled. "I was... working. No, I really was. I swear."

"On what, then?"

But he wouldn't answer. He kissed the top of her head. "Just trust me."

"Oooh, don't fall for it, Hermione," Ginny warned, whipping up a bowl of chocolate cake mixture. "In the *Witch Weekly* serial stories, whenever the man says trust me, it always means he's having an affair."

"Now look here, you little brat," Ron began, but stopped and grinned at something behind Hermione. "*That* looks good—here, let me help you test it." He kissed Hermione's head again, let her go, and moved past her to the worktop, where he tried to eat cake mixture with his fingers.

"Don't you dare stick your fingers in it—" Ginny slapped his hand. "That's disgusting! You haven't washed!"

"I'm clean," Ron protested, but Ginny slapped his hand again. "Just let me lick the spoon then," he whined.

"Apologize for calling me a little brat."

Ron put a hand over his heart. "I'm so sorry, Ginny. It was rude of me. I'll never do it again."

She sniffed, and handed him the spoon.

"Thanks, brat," said Ron, and stuck it in his mouth, jumping back to avoid being elbowed by

Ginny. "So," he said, when he'd licked it clean and tossed it into the sink. "What were you two lovely ladies hugging about?"

Hermione watched him carefully. He still hadn't answered her question... but she did trust him. If he said he'd been working, then he probably had, even if he *was* acting dodgy. "We were just sorting something out," she said. "I've asked Ginny to have a look at my parents, on Saturday."

Ron's expression went serious at once. "That's great," he said. "What, do you think you can do anything for them, Ginny?"

"I don't know yet—look, would you stop crowding the kitchen and do something useful? Set the table."

"Hermione's not doing anything useful," Ron pointed out. "Why doesn't she have to set the table?"

"Hermione helped *cook*."

Ron glanced at the soup, and then at Hermione's spoon. "You cooked?"

Hermione put a hand on her hip. "Well just don't eat it then!"

"No no, I didn't say that." Ron gave her shoulder a pat. "I'm sure it's great..."

Hermione pushed him through the kitchen door and handed him napkins and silverware. "Go away." She turned back to Ginny. "Can I help with anything else?"

Ginny shook her head. She poured the mixture into pans, stopping halfway through to rub her temples. She really did look tired.

"You know," Hermione said, "You don't have to go to St. Mungo's this weekend, if you're not feeling well."

Ginny dropped her fingers from her head. "No, I want to."

"Well... but you have school, and the dragons, and the N.E.W.T.s to think about, so perhaps when you're less busy it would be better."

"That's true, Ginny," called Ron, from the next room. "You'll never balance two jobs with school. You'll have to stop working with the dragons."

Ginny breathed hard through her nose, and pushed her hair behind her ears. "I'm sure I'll be fine," she called back, too lightly.

"You'll tire yourself out." Ron stuck his head into the kitchen. "And you're killing Harry. Hand me that ladle, would you, Hermione?"

Hermione did so, glancing at Ginny. She looked furious.

"I'm doing," Ginny said through gritted teeth, "the *opposite* of killing Harry, if you please. The dragons are—"

"Look, I'm just telling you what I see." Ron took the ladle and disappeared again. "You shouldn't be up there with Malfoy like that, getting all friendly. It's sick."

Ginny gripped the edge of the worktop. "Is that what *Harry* says?" she called sharply.

"He doesn't have to say it. *Accio*, placemats!" They flew from the cupboard and past Hermione's face, nearly hitting her nose. "It's just the truth."

"That I'm getting friendly with Malfoy?" Ginny asked in a strangled voice.

"On the same broom, aren't you?" Ron's voice grew more heated as he spoke. "Holds you round the middle, doesn't he?"

"Do you *see*?" Ginny hissed, turning to Hermione. "Harry *must* have told him that—*this* is what he really thinks—" Ginny sent the cake pans flying into the brick oven with such a clatter that Hermione knew half the mixture must have spilled.

"What're you muttering in there?" Ron called.

"Nothing. And I don't want to talk about this."

"Well no one wants to see you on Malfoy's broom, but we don't get a choice, do we?" Ron appeared in the doorway, red in the face. "Someone's got to tell you. Dad doesn't want you up there either, but he has to be impartial and you *know* Harry can't stand to watch it, and I can't believe you're trusting Malfoy not to push you to your death—"

"Despite what you and Harry might think," Ginny said savagely, rounding on Ron, "Malfoy's doing everyone a favor by helping me."

"Malfoy probably got the dragons ill in the first place!" Ron said. "Just so he could do this!"

"Please," Ginny scoffed. "Would you *think*? He's been pretty generous about the P.A.P., if you'd give it an objective look—"

"So it's true!" Ron pointed a finger at her. "Listen to you, standing up for him!"

"So *what's* true?" Ginny advanced on Ron, and Hermione backed out of her way, too shocked by the sudden ferocity of their fight to do anything about it.

Ron stood his ground, arms crossed. "You, getting friendly with Malfoy."

"Oh for God's—" Ginny raised her hands as if to shove Ron, but only clenched her fingers in the air. She turned to Hermione. "I'm sorry, but I'm not hungry anymore," she said. "I'm going home." She glared at Ron. "And you can tell Harry that if he has a problem he can come to *me* instead of talking behind my back."

"Harry never said anything!" Ron said. "It was—"

Ginny Disapparated.

"It was Charlie," Ron finished peevishly. "Well *she's* in a foul mood tonight. I can't believe Dad let her get her license early—that's not fair, we should have got *ours* early—here, let's get the food off the fire before it burns."

But Hermione left him alone to salvage dinner. She went to the table, sat down, and tried to organize her thoughts. She knew why Ron was angry; if she was perfectly honest, then she had to admit that she too was disgusted by the thought of Malfoy so close to Ginny. But Ron's insinuations had been unfair. Hermione knew it wasn't her argument, but when Ron joined her at the table and heaped potatoes onto her plate she couldn't help saying what she felt.

"You shouldn't have accused her like that."

Ron glanced at her and ladled out the soup. "Harry's miserable," he said shortly, as if that explained everything.

"Did he *say* that?"

"Hermione." Ron thudded into his seat and gave her an impatient look. "When does he ever *say* anything? He's just miserable and I don't blame him—if I had to watch *you* climb in front of Malfoy every day—"

"You'd think we were having it off?"

"No!" Ron looked repulsed.

"Well that's what you suggested Ginny's doing."

"No, it was Charlie." Ron speared a potato with his fork. "Look. It's not like we think *she'd* ever. But I don't put anything past him, and he'd do anything to piss us off, that lying sack of—"

"Ginny's just trying to do her job," Hermione said. "She's doing an amazing job. No one else can do her job."

"Then someone else ought to do Malfoy's!" Ron's mouth was grim. "Charlie says he hangs all over Ginny on that broom."

"He's only doing it to annoy Harry, Ron."

"I don't care why he's doing it, that's my *sister*!" Ron snarled. "He'd better just stop it before I—"

"Punch him out and break his head on a rock?" Hermione leveled him with a gaze. "If you hurt him twice, you'll never be able to pass it off as self-defense. You'll look like the antagonist. You know that."

Ron sat in stony silence.

"Ginny's job is none of your business. Harry's feelings are none of your business."

Ron snorted. "That's rich, coming from you."

Hermione drew back. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You wrote a letter of complaint to the Secretary Privy about the dragon schedules—don't deny it, Charlie told me. You're as worried about Harry as I am."

Hermione opened her mouth to retort, but found she couldn't. Ron was right. "That's true..." she said slowly, as an idea occurred to her. "You know, perhaps... perhaps we should *both* stay out of this."

Ron stared. "What, not help Harry?" he asked, as if she'd just suggested they stop breathing.

"Not exactly..." She bit her lip. "But if he's determined to keep on riding dragons, and if Ginny really wants to work up there..." She shrugged. "That's their choice."

"But—Dementors!" Ron waved his fork in frustration. "And Malfoy!"

"I know. And you work with Death Eaters, and I'm trying to lock up prisoners." She laughed. "We're none of us in the most uplifting professions, are we?"

"Seriously." Ron looked keenly at her. "You really think we should just butt out?"

"I really do," said Hermione, surprised to find that she meant it. "Of course, I'm used to worrying my head off about Harry, and I'm sure it'll be hard not to, but he and Ginny were great about Cortona, and they're so proud of *you*—" She nudged Ron's foot, under the table. "Let's just... I don't know. Try to support them."

Ron gazed at her, looking torn between dismay and admiration. "What did that Thinker *do* to you?"

"Nothing." Hermione smiled a little. "But Harry and Ginny are going to have to take care of themselves for a while, because I have enough to think about." Her eyes drifted down to her plate. She knew she'd much rather worry about Harry than deal with what was on her mind.

"To think about or to *Think* about?" Ron teased.

"Very funny." Hermione had a bite of soup and was unsurprised to find it excellent. She and Ron ate in silence for a while and then—"Actually, I do want to meditate tonight. I think I'll go."

"No, f'ay 'ere," Ron mumbled through a mouthful of potatoes. "P'ease."

Hermione hesitated. The truth was that she didn't want to leave just yet. "I suppose I could try to do it here..."

Ron laid down his spoon. "Won't I distract you?" he asked, grinning cheekily. "With my irresistible charms?"

"I don't know, will you?"

"I'll try." He ate another bite of soup. "Did you really make this?" he asked, pointing to the bowl with his spoon.

"Just the broth."

"It's great."

"Oh." Hermione felt a bit better. "Thank you." She stood and began to clear up the plates.

"No no, I'll do that. You go and get your meditating over with so I can... distract you." He raked his eyes over her and looked back down, red-eared, at his soup.

Hermione flushed. She would have protested, but she couldn't deny that being distracted by Ron was high on her list of priorities. "I'll try to be quick about it," she said, trying and failing to be brisk and businesslike as she got up from the table. "But I really do have to concentrate for a little while. I've been perfectly worthless to Penny."

Ron looked up sharply. "Don't say that about yourself."

Hermione shrugged. "It's true," she said, and went away to Ron's room before he could protest further. She had barely settled, cross-legged, in the middle of the bed, when she heard the sound of running water, followed by the thud of footsteps.

"You're not meditating just yet."

Hermione opened her eyes. Ron stood in the doorway. "I'm not?"

"You're being too hard on yourself." He shut the door and came to sit beside her. "You can't think like that."

Hermione shrugged. "Actually, the Thinking helps."

"Sure, if you've got your head on straight. Which you don't."

"Ron, I'm not trying to be hard on myself, I'm just telling the truth. I haven't been able to—"

"You're a brilliant woman," Ron said quietly, and Hermione fell silent. *Woman*. She liked that. "There's nothing you can't do."

Hermione looked up at him and searched his eyes for reassurance. "Then what's wrong with me? Why does everything seem so hard lately? Why can't I help Penny?"

"Because your heart's not in it." He kissed her cheek. "Your heart's with your mum and dad, Hermione."

It was the truth. Hermione's eyes stung. She let Ron pull her with him onto the pillows, and huddled against him with her head on his chest.

"Let's think, shall we?" he asked.

She breathed in the scent of his robes. He was solid and safe. "All right."

"What did you tell me the other night? Penelope's enhanced some kind of development diagrams for the spells on the walls? Indestructible Charms or something?"

"Mhmm."

"Right..." Ron rubbed his fingertips into the muscles of her back, and Hermione gave into the sensation of it. There was no unfinished enchantment hanging over her head; there were no parents lying cold and silent. There was only Ron.

"I love you," she mumbled.

He patted her back. "You can't combine a couple of charms, can you?"

"Yes we can." Hermione slumped completely into his chest as he continued to rub her back. He had the most wonderful hands. She remembered when they'd been too big for the rest of him, all oversized and awkward. They were still a bit clumsy, but she liked it. "But the... problem remains because... no existing containment charm, no matter how powerful is... completely foolproof."

"Containment charms that you've been casting on walls and doors, right?"

"Mmm."

"What if it wasn't a containment charm? You've been focusing on walls and locks—what about a whole border?"

Hermione lifted her head. "Border?" She frowned. "You mean like a ward? Like what's around the Ministry? Those are breakable, we know that—even the curse wards round the vaults in Gringotts are breakable."

"What about the ones that went round Hogwarts? You couldn't Apparate in or out, right? Well, what would have happened if you'd tried?"

Hermione stared at him, the wheels in her head beginning to turn for the first time in weeks. "You'd... well, it was quite complicated. Usually, if you smash into an Apparition border then you splinch, but the way Hogwarts was set up, that magic was completely defunct. You couldn't even have got far enough to splinch. You could have concentrated all you liked and you would have stayed standing right where you were."

"Couldn't you use something like that?"

"It doesn't solve the problem of being able to walk up to the wards and break them down..."

Ron chewed his lip for a moment, and then his eyebrows shot up. "So stick an Apparition border in there. You try to go through one of those and you're splinched, right? Pretty hard to escape after that. You could line it up with one of your Indestructible Charms or whatever it is you're using, layer them or something—is that possible? Wrap it all up in an Impenetrable Curse and..." Ron laughed; the vibration rumbled through Hermione's chest. "Hell, I don't know, I'm probably way off the mark."

But Hermione's heart was racing. An *Apparition* border. Combined with the strength of the rest of Penelope's charm diagrams and research... Hermione rolled off of Ron and sat up. "Oh my goodness," she whispered, pressing her hands to her face. "Oh yes. How could I not have thought—so *simple*—" She looked down at Ron, flat on his back and looking bemused.

"Don't tell me I just got it right?" he asked.

Hermione wanted to kiss him. And slap him. "How is that I spend *five months* working on stream of consciousness thought and you're the one who—oh, Ron!" She shook his arm, giddy with relief. "You're a genius!"

He lit up. "Yeah?" He propped himself up on his elbow. "That'll really work?"

"Not the whole idea, but the concept of an Apparition border—forced splinching—this is exactly—oh, Ron—" She dropped his arm and smacked it. "It's not fair!" she wailed, but she was too thrilled, at the moment, to be jealous that the idea was not her own.

"Hey!" Ron sat up and grabbed her hands. "Don't hit the genius."

Hermione couldn't think straight. "You should have been the Thinker, not me—you've got the proper—your mind's just—"

"Perfect?" he suggested.

"Perfectly *random* and oh—Ron—" she flew at him and kissed him. "You've done it again, this is just like Voldemort, you're brilliant, I love you, I love you..."

Ron fell back onto the pillows under Hermione's sudden flurry of passionate kisses, and he wrapped his arms around her, laughing. "Well damn!" He rolled her onto her back and grinned down at her. "Need any other answers? I've got loads. Secrets of the universe are right in here." He gently bumped his forehead against hers and Hermione laughed.

"You idiot."

"Hey now. The smartest girl I know says I'm a genius."

"She must have ulterior motives."

Ron snickered softly. "Yeah, she's always buttering me up, trying to get into my robes..."

But Hermione didn't bother to retort. Her mouth was suddenly busy doing something altogether better.

* * * * *

Privet Drive was not aware that two wizards had just Apparated onto its manicured lawns. If it had been aware, it would have been quite offended. But Harry didn't care about what Privet Drive and its occupants thought anymore—gone were the days when he'd been treated like an abnormality for being a wizard. This wasn't his world, and it never had been. Standing on the walk in front of number four, he looked up at the front of the house in which he'd used to live, and grimaced.

The Dursleys' house was terminally predictable in all its appearances. The automatic porch bulb lighted the brass number four on the outside wall. The flowerbeds Harry had used to weed, though out of use in January, were still pruned mercilessly into tortured shapes. The standard curtains hung motionless in the lighted square windows. The sight of it all made him feel physically ill.

"God, I hate this place," he muttered.

Sirius elbowed him. "Ah, there you are, Harry. All right—how do you want to do this?"

"Apparate in, just to the other side of the door. You take the left side and I'll take the right, so we don't splinch together."

"That *would* be awkward," Sirius agreed. "Don't know that Arthur himself can get us out of trouble if we're caught doing this."

Harry shrugged. "Mr. Weasley blew up the fireplace here, once," he said, watching through the curtains for shadows, and hoping very much that they wouldn't hit anyone. "All the same, I'd rather not splinch."

"I'll go left. See you inside."

They Apparated to the other side of the door, and Harry immediately backed against it, shocked by the noise and the overpowering odor.

Dogs. Nasty ones. They ran in from the kitchen, raced through the front hallway and bounded away up the stairs. But the Dursleys had never had pets; Aunt Petunia hated animals. "They never had dogs," Harry whispered to Sirius, whom he knew was right beside him. "I wonder if they still live here!"

"Vernon!" came a high-pitched and very whiny voice, from the direction of the kitchen.

"Never mind, they live here," whispered Harry. "That's Aunt Petunia."

The whiny voice went on: "*I will not* stand these beasts in my house for another day! They're destroying my carpets! My kitchen!"

Heavy footsteps pounded down the stairs and Harry elbowed Sirius as a walrusy man with no neck and a purple face appeared before them. "Uncle Vernon," he whispered, and flattened himself against the front door as Uncle Vernon came much too close—was he headed outside? Harry's heart pounded; he tried to push Sirius to the left, but there was nowhere to go.

To Harry's immense relief, Uncle Vernon veered left at the last second and stomped into the kitchen. "Your ruddy sister blows up," he roared, "and we keep your blasted freak of a nephew for seventeen years, and now you won't keep Marge's dogs in the house for two weeks? I won't have it!"

From Harry's left there came a growling noise—too high from the ground to be a dog. "Blasted freak of a—and ruddy *what*?" Sirius hissed. "Do they mean—"

"My mum," Harry said matter-of-factly. "That's how they always talk about her."

"Can't we just kill them?"

Harry laughed. "Wait till you hear how they talk about my *dad*. Good-for-nothing, wastrel, scoundrel, that ridiculous Potter fellow..."

Sirius's fury was palpable; Harry felt his arm tense. "Somehow our plan just doesn't seem harsh enough," he muttered.

"Don't worry, it is. A little magic'll mess them up for months."

The plan was to go round number four, Privet Drive, and cast a Computational Hex on a few household items. It would make it impossible for the Dursleys to measure simple things, like how much milk was poured into a glass, how much toothpaste was squeezed onto a toothbrush, or just how much moustache was trimmed into the sink. Harry had entertained himself all day with visions of Aunt Petunia pulling massive, overblown cakes out of the oven, Uncle Vernon overswinging on his indoor golf-putting practice mat, and Dudley putting more food into his mouth than would fit. Although, thought Harry, that wouldn't be so different from usual. Perhaps it wasn't the nasty revenge they deserved—Sirius had seemed a bit disappointed that Harry hadn't wanted to be more brutal—but Harry knew the Dursleys. And this would drive them mad.

"All right," Sirius whispered. "Let's get started."

Harry saw the door to the front room swing open, and he followed an invisible Sirius inside.

"There's not much in here," Harry said, looking around the pristine room. Several photographs of Dudley with more chins than ever stared back at him from the mantelpiece.

"Well, there's this," Sirius said. Harry saw a jet of red sparks fly towards the fireplace.

"What are you doing?"

"They light fires, don't they?"

"Sometimes, but that's... that's *dangerous*," Harry said. "You don't want them to burn down the house."

"I don't?"

Harry shook his head violently, forgetting that Sirius couldn't see it. "*You're* supposed to be the godfather. You go to the back room—past the stairs, I'll show you—and hex Uncle Vernon's golf mat. If I can trust you alone."

Sirius laughed. "It's all right. I won't kill anyone."

"Shush. Good. You know what a golf mat looks like, don't you? It's the green thing on the floor. I'll go do the upstairs toilets and I'll meet you right back here, all right?"

"Yes."

"Good. All right, let's go—I want to get out of here."

Sirius gave a snort. "Harry, the whole point is to stick around and watch the fruits of your labor." But Harry heard Sirius's footsteps come closer, and together they went back into the hallway and toward the stairs.

Just as Harry put his hand on the banister, there was a muffled, rumbling noise, rather like the sound of thunder from a long way off. "Dudley," Harry hissed. "He's coming down the stairs. Back up, give him—"

"A wide berth?" Sirius snickered.

"Shush!"

"You know, your dad used to try and shush me during these things," Sirius said, not bothering to whisper. "It only made me louder."

The rumbling noise grew louder. Dudley had come into view on the stairs, and Harry gaped at him. He looked like Uncle Vernon without the moustache. What little recognizable neck he had ever had was gone; it had been replaced by one thick chin that stretched from his ripe red face to his wobbling chest, and his eyes had shrunk to the size of pinholes. He wore a dark suit, and Harry thought he looked like a sumo wrestler about to be married.

The rumbling noise stopped. Dudley paused on the bottom step and looked around, confused. "Dad?"

"Yes, son?" Sirius said, in a very bad imitation of Uncle Vernon's voice. It didn't help that the voice was coming from two feet in front of Dudley's face, instead of from the kitchen.

Dudley stood silent for a moment longer, and then shook his head and continued towards the kitchen. Harry kicked in Sirius's general direction.

"Ow!"

"Serves you right," Harry said.

"I'm sorry," Sirius said, "I thought I brought Harry Potter with me on this mission. But it seems that he sent Hermione Granger instead."

Harry made a noise of annoyance. "All right, now go in that room there and—"

"Stop bossing me about, or I'll bring Ron next time."

"Oh, nice threat—some godfather you are!"

"...heard a funny voice, right back here."

Both Harry and Sirius went silent. Dudley was back, with Uncle Vernon right behind him.

"Are you telling me you didn't say anything to me, just a minute ago? You didn't say, 'Yes son'?"

Uncle Vernon stared at Dudley as though he'd sprouted another head, and Dudley stared back at him in much the same way. Harry could tell from the looks on their faces—looks he'd endured many times—that they were thinking of him and that they were wondering if magic had something to do with all of this. It had, after all, been responsible for every interesting thing that had ever happened in this house.

"First date jitters?" Uncle Vernon answered, ignoring Dudley's question, and patting him on the back. "No need to be nervous, son. Janice is a lovely girl—her father's the best drill salesman at Grunnings, besides me, of course."

Harry's jaw dropped. Dudley. *Dating?* He wasn't sure whether to laugh or be sick.

"I'm telling you I heard something!" Dudley said, stomping his foot and shaking the hallway.

"Never mind, son," Uncle Vernon said nervously. "It was probably just one of Marge's dogs. We're all getting used to them and your mother's right, they *are* a bit noisy."

Dudley didn't look convinced, but he straightened his bowtie and reached up to smooth a hand over his hair. "Mum said I should take her to see *Shakespeare in Love*. Wish *The Matrix* was out. I don't want to go see some stupid sissy film."

"Yes, well you'll want to have a snack before you go," Uncle Vernon said. "And don't worry about petrol, I filled the car up this morning." He headed back towards the kitchen, and Dudley followed, casting a last, dark look over his shoulder.

"A film?" Sirius said, when the kitchen door had closed. "I've been to a film. Your mum took us to see *Star Wars*—it was bloody brilliant. Like Muggles with wands!"

Harry tried again to shush Sirius, but it didn't work.

"I loved that great big hairy creature—" Sirius made a terrible, groaning noise. "And everyone

could understand him!"

The Dursleys all laughed very loudly in the kitchen. Harry could tell that they were only trying to ignore the supernatural noises that were ruining their supper.

"We should follow Dudley to the cinema," Sirius continued. "I want to see another one."

Following Dudley to the cinema wasn't a bad idea at all, thought Harry. He hadn't been to a film in ages—even if it did sound like a stupid one. And Dudley on a date sounded too good to miss.

"Wonder what his bird looks like," Sirius whispered. "Think she's at home having a snack, too?"

"Look, if we hurry we can finish here and jump in the car—meet me back here as fast as you can," said Harry, and sprinted up the stairs. He cast the Computational Hex on the toothbrushes, moustache scissors and bathtubs in record time—Hermione would have been proud of him—and raced back down again, slamming into Sirius at the bottom of the stairs.

"Oi, look where you're going!"

"I was!" Harry panted. "You're invisible!"

Sirius snickered. "Right then, let's get in the car."

The two of them sneaked back out of the house, and got into the back seat of Uncle Vernon's car. It still smelled like old shoes and plastic, and yesterday's doughnuts. Harry pulled the invisibility cloak off of his head for a minute and tried to breathe. "It stinks in here," he complained.

Sirius's head appeared beside him. "Get used to it, it's about to stink worse—"

And they both covered up at the sound of keys jingling in the driveway.

Dudley was wearing half a bottle of cologne, or at least that was how it smelled to Harry, who buried his face in his knees. Sirius gave an audible sniff, but the car door slammed at the same moment, and there was no need to elbow him. Dudley started the car, and Harry and Sirius waited in the back seat in silence all the way to Janice's house. Harry wasn't sure why he wanted to shriek with laughter the whole way there, but he kept his face buried in his knees just in case he should lose control of himself.

Janice's house looked just like the Dursleys' house, except that it was located on Hedge Path and faced west and had a green door. When Janice climbed into the car, Harry had to shake his head to make sure he wasn't imagining things. She was... thin. Very thin. With a very long neck that looked like it had been made for spying over neighbors' fences.

"I just can't wait to see the film!" she said, in a voice that was eerily familiar. "Mum says it's really romantic."

"Er," said Dudley. The back of his neck was the color of a Blast-Ended Skrewt's bum.

The cinema was crowded and there was no way to sit beside Dudley and Janice, but Harry thought it was probably best if they stayed standing.

"Let's sit here," Sirius whispered.

Harry looked down to his right; there were two empty seats but he didn't want to risk it. "No!" he hissed. "What if someone else tries to sit there?" Almost as if to prove his point, a woman came in and sat in the seat moments later.

"Well, we could take these cloaks off," Sirius whispered. "It's not as if he's going to see us now."

"But if we take them off, we won't be able to use our wands," said Harry, who had been thinking, in the car.

"Our wands?" Sirius sounded excited. "What are we using them for?"

"There are a few charms we use, on the dragons—for communication." Harry pulled his wand. "You probably know *Deferus*."

Sirius made a sound of approval. "So we can listen in—"

"And talk to him. Right in his ear." Harry laughed. "I know it's not nice, but he did used to beat me up."

"Let's torture him."

"Not torture," Harry said quickly. "Not torture. Just annoy." He concentrated on Dudley. "*Deferus*."

"*Deferus*," Sirius repeated.

The cinema fell into darkness and everyone hushed. Harry and Sirius backed against the wall to let an usher walk down the center aisle with a flashlight. They were all the way at the back, and Dudley and Janice were up near the front, but it wasn't hard to tell which dark pair of silhouettes they were. It was all normal people and then a cotton swab next to an elephant.

Harry waited, not sure exactly what he wanted to say to Dudley, and half afraid of what Sirius would say. He found himself watching the film with a bit of interest—everyone was wearing clothes just like Nearly Headless Nick's, and he wondered if Sir Nicholas had ever been involved in the

theater. He lost himself in the story for a bit, until a high-pitched voice brought him back to reality, such as it was.

"Oh, oh, oh, Duuuuuddley."

Harry looked over to Dudley and Janice; Dudley's arm was draped around the back of Janice's seat, but Janice wasn't speaking. As a matter of fact, "Janice" sounded incredibly like Sirius Black in falsetto.

Dudley didn't seem to notice. He took Sirius's dialogue as encouragement, and lowered his hand to rest on Janice's bony shoulders. His other hand rested in an enormous bucket of popcorn.

Sirius giggled so effectively that Harry almost believed, for a minute, that his godfather was Dudley's date.

Janice didn't look very comfortable, in Harry's opinion. She looked sideways at Dudley's hand on her shoulder, and seemed resigned.

"Sometimes I like to dress up like a man," Sirius said, in the same high voice. Harry couldn't believe that anyone would believe that he was an actual woman. Then again, he hadn't heard Janice speak often enough, and neither had Dudley.

"What?" Dudley looked concerned. His hand slid back up to rest on the seat.

"I didn't say anything," whispered Janice. "Shhhh! I'm trying to listen."

Harry didn't see how there was anything to listen to. All that was happening on the screen was that a woman was getting all of her clothes unraveled. In truth, it was kind of interesting, and for a moment Harry forgot that Dudley existed.

"Oh," said the false, high voice at his side. "I... I wish someone would do that to *me*."

Harry clapped both hands over his mouth to stop himself from shouting. Sirius was getting out of hand—but it *was* funny. And Dudley's hand had slid down to rest on Janice's shoulders again.

"Lower," said Sirius, in a breathy, high-pitched whisper.

Dudley's hand moved lower and Harry had to look away. That was just wrong. Suddenly, Sirius burst into a fit of laughter.

Harry repealed the communication spell. "What?" he whispered.

"Didn't you see that? She jumped three feet in the air—Harry, mate, keep your eye on the Snitch!"

But Harry felt rather sorry for Janice. The point of being here was to unsettle Dudley, but Sirius's pranks were just encouraging him. Harry thought he knew what would do the trick. He recast the communication spell.

"Hey, Dudley," he said, in his own voice. "That's an interesting spot to put your hand."

Both of Dudley's hands flew into the air as if he'd been arrested, and popcorn scattered all over the people to the left of him. "H-Harry?" he whispered frantically. "Is that y-you?"

"What?" Janice asked, turning to look at Dudley for the first time since the film had begun. "Did you just call me Harry?"

"I, er..." Dudley seemed to be at a loss for words.

"Answer the young lady *politely*," Harry said. "Tell her, 'Yes, Janice, and I'm very sorry, I'll never do it again.'"

"Yes, Janice, I'm very sorry and I'll never do it again," said Dudley, who was too afraid to remember the question.

Harry heard something fall to the floor beside him, sniggering, and he was fairly certain it was Sirius.

Janice was now ignoring Dudley, and trying very hard to watch the film. She'd shifted away from Dudley in her seat. Dudley looked from side to side, his breathing labored, his hands still in the air on either side of his head.

"Put your hands down!" said a man behind him. "And both of you, shut up!"

"It's not my fault!" Dudley began in an obvious panic, struggling to turn round in his seat. Janice cringed.

"He told you to shut up," Harry said, enjoying the spectacle. For once, it wasn't him.

"You shut up, Harry!" Dudley shouted into the dark theatre.

"SHHHHHH!" Several people hissed at once. Janice shrank down into her seat.

But Dudley was still looking wildly around. "Where are you? I know you're there! I knew you'd be back! I knew we weren't rid of you!"

"That's right," Harry said, keeping his voice low. The whole crowd was beginning to complain. "I'm *back*."

Dudley lumbered to his feet and started pushing his way towards the aisle. The people in his way made various noises of pain.

"Get away from me!" Dudley screeched. "Wherever you are, just go back to your world full of freaks! I've had enough of you and your magic!" He stumbled into the aisle and made for the exit door at the front of the cinema, just below the screen.

"I'll never leave!" said Sirius, who had regained his composure enough to gasp out a few words. "I'll be back, Dudley—I'll be back!"

Dudley pushed his way out of the cinema, blubbing like a baby, and Harry couldn't help the grin that spread across his face. "You can't run fast enough," he muttered, knowing that Dudley could still hear him, and from beyond the exit door he heard a howl of dismay. It was enough. He repealed the charm and put his wand in his belt, incredibly satisfied. He wouldn't be back. But Dudley would always wonder.

The audience settled down again, and Janice looked relieved. Harry wondered vaguely how she was going to get home.

"C'mon," Sirius whispered, and somehow managed to grab his elbow. They sneaked out of the cinema and into the car park in time to see Uncle Vernon's car screeching off into the street.

At the same time, they pulled off their invisibility cloaks and looked at each other. Sirius was ruddy, his hair a mess, his eyes alight.

"Wasn't that brilliant?" he demanded. "When are we doing it again?"

Harry fixed his glasses and crumpled his cloak in his hand. "It was fun," he admitted, still grinning. "I feel sort of sorry for Janice—"

"We did her a favor, Harry," Sirius cut in. "Poor girl. That beast was trying to molest her on the first date—"

"That was *your* fault!" Harry said, but Sirius was laughing and he had to join in. "You—you really thought it was brilliant?" he asked.

"For the first Black and Potter in nearly two decades?" Sirius asked. "Not bad at all, Harry. Not bad at all." He grinned. "My turn next," he said, and rubbed his hands together. "What do you say to asking Trelawney for a bit of advice on your future?"

"Er—no."

"Really? Not even for the joy of seeing the *Grim* appear in her classroom while you're having your tea leaves read? Come on, Harry, she'll faint dead away, it'll be great."

Harry burst out laughing. Sirius was crazy. Really insane. Possibly not the best role model in the world. But his mum and dad must've known that there was something about him more important than sanity.

He stood in the car park next to his godfather and laughed for a long, long time.

Residual Damage

Remus knew, from the look on Ginny's face, that she was about to ask him for permission to do something stupid, and that if he were any sort of respectable guardian, he would have to say no.

"Remus?"

Her tone of voice strengthened his conviction; it was the perfect blend of innocence and humility and warning. One word conveyed that he was the only person in the world capable of granting her wish, that it was a most desperately selfless wish, and that, if he wouldn't help her, then she would have to throw herself into the sea.

"Hm?" he answered.

Neutrality was a trait he possessed naturally, and he had honed it to a skill during his years at Hogwarts. Having been thrust by James and Sirius into more unwise situations than he could count, he had learned how to stay well back from the edge of peril. "Hm?" was always a safe answer, when he was approached in this way. It implied that he could not even tell that Ginny perceived her situation to be dire, and sometimes the most effective deflection was simply to pretend ignorance. He kept his eyes on her latest Arithmancy assignment and dipped his quill into red ink for the hundredth time, thinking that it was a very good thing that Ginny Weasley was a Healer. She certainly didn't make much of a student in the more theoretical areas.

"I have to ask you something."

Remus circled a mistake on her paper. "About Arithmancy?" he asked, knowing full well that she was as likely to approach him about Arithmancy on a Saturday as he was to forget a dose of Wolfsbane Potion.

"No... but first, how are you feeling?"

Remus looked up and smiled. Last night had been a blue moon, and though he had slept in this morning, the whole process had never felt so casual. Almost restful. "Very well. Thank you, Ginny."

"Oh good." She shifted to her other foot and moved her eyes from his to look at her paper. "Did I really get that many wrong?"

"More than that many. There's another page left to mark."

"Oh. Am I going to fail, or anything?"

"No, but your work is slightly below average."

She didn't look concerned. "But in my Healing courses I've improved a lot, haven't I?"

"Mmm," Remus said noncommittally. Whatever she wanted, it was something to do with Healing, and she was trying to trick him into saying something that would give her implicit permission. It was a subtle tactic, but Remus was a subtler interpreter.

"I think the dragons have given me a lot of strength," Ginny said.

Remus turned the page of her assignment.

"I feel ready to try something new."

Remus dipped his quill into the red ink.

"So I was thinking of stopping by St. Mungo's today to see the Grangers."

Remus paused. A drop of ink splashed onto the paper. He had known this request was coming, but he hadn't expected to field it quite so soon, and he had certainly hoped that the dragons would have taught her not to tackle too much at once. "Is that so?"

"Yes." A little iron entered her tone. "That's so. But I wanted to tell you, first."

"Tell, or ask?"

"Well, *ask* - but Remus you have to let me." Ginny's subtle tactics vanished; she dragged a chair to the desk and sat down to look him in the eye. "I promised Hermione."

Remus gave her a hard look. "What exactly did you promise? I hope you haven't got her hopes

up, Ginny, because there's no precedent—

"I told her that I didn't know if anything was possible, but that I'd have a look at her parents today and see what I can feel. That's all I want to do, just hold out my hands and see." Ginny's eyes shone but there were shadows beneath them. "Please say it's all right, *please*."

"You," said Remus, putting down his quill and folding his hands on the desk, "are spreading yourself too thin. You're involved in a major Ministry project, you handle my transformations, you've just finished studying for your Apparition examinations, you've got schoolwork to keep up with, you haven't even begun to prepare for your N.E.W.T.s, you're trying to balance your—friendships—" Remus raised an eyebrow. "And who knows what other mad experiments you're trying out, behind my back."

"Remus, I can *do* it."

"Ginny, you're overextended."

"Oh, don't say I can't go. Don't make me disappoint Hermione."

The guilt card. Ginny must have been taking lessons from Sirius. "If you are disappointing Hermione, then it is no one's fault but yours. You should have known better than to say yes without asking."

"Please—"

"No. And that's the end of it."

Ginny sat back in her chair. "I don't want to disobey," she said, and crossed her arms.

"Then don't." But Remus understood the warning. If he didn't permit her, she'd go without consent. And there was no way to stop her, really. She was of age, she had her license, and she was on the designated family list of wizards permitted to enter the Grangers' room.

"Remus, I have to do this. I have to know if there's at least a possibility, it's *Hermione*. She's my friend, and they're her parents, and you'd do it if you could. Imagine if it was Sirius's parents—you'd've done it already."

Remus couldn't think of an answer for that.

"I have to do this," she repeated. "But I'd really like for you to come with me, if you're not too tired. That way, you can supervise me and make sure I don't overextend myself."

And she had won. Remus sighed. "Are you a chess player, Ginny?"

"Yes—well, I'm not as good as Ron, or anything—why?"

"No reason. Get your cloak, let's visit the Grangers."

Ginny leapt to her feet. "Oh, thank you—" And she was gone and back in seconds, wrapping a cloak round her shoulders, stuffing identification into her pocket. "See you there!" she said happily, and was gone.

A few minutes later, signed in and permitted entry, Remus pushed open the door of the Grangers' hospital room. He had only been here twice, at the very beginning, when they had all come to ensure that Hermione got her way and that her parents would be given proper wizarding care, as they deserved. He had forgotten the fetid air, the overlying sterility not quite masking the true illness and pain underneath. Behind him, Ginny drew an uneven breath, and he was still too much wolf not to hear it.

"Are you all right?" He turned to look at her and she nodded, but was bone-white.

"This place... the whole hospital."

"Overwhelming?"

"So... many people are in pain. I can't..." Her eyes filled with tears. "There are children upstairs, aren't there?"

Her senses had grown powerfully acute if she could feel that much. "Do you want to leave, Ginny?" Remus put out his arm and Ginny grabbed it as if it was a banister and she was about to fall down stairs. "That's it, we're going," Remus said, and attempted to steer her out of the room, but Ginny straightened with what must have been incredible effort, and walked across the room to Hermione's mother.

"Give me a minute, it'll only take a minute, I just want to see what..." Ginny looked into Mrs. Granger's face. "Hermione has her bone structure, doesn't she?" she murmured. "But she's so thin." Ginny stretched a hand out, and held it two feet above Mrs. Granger. "Oh no, no..."

"What is it?" Remus went to stand with her. "What do you feel?"

"N-nothing," Ginny said. Her lip trembled. "I don't feel anything. There's no aura. What does that mean?"

Remus didn't want to say what he thought it meant. Mrs. Granger's face was lifeless except for her wide-open eyes. And except for the frozen horror in those eyes, Remus believed that all life had gone out of her.

But Ginny did not give up. She moved her hand a foot closer to Mrs. Granger. "Nothing," she said, and dropped it several inches lower. When she was nearly touching Mrs. Granger's stomach, Ginny shrieked and snatched her hand away.

"What?" Remus said, worried.

"Put your hand there, put your hand there. Can you feel that?"

Remus put his hand where Ginny told him, and felt nothing. "I'm sorry, no."

"Damn. Hermione's aura is close to her body, too, but not this close," Ginny said, talking rapidly. "Hermione's is sort of an ellipse, it's really tight and smooth, but this isn't even an aura, this isn't human at all, this is—this is—I don't recognize—" she winced again, and took a small step back. "But I suppose it could ... I mean, I have no idea... but what does the Cruciatus Curse feel like?"

Remus gave a short, involuntary laugh. "You want words?"

"I... " Ginny looked a bit lost. "There aren't any, I'm sure."

"No." Remus blocked out a very disturbing memory that drifted into his mind. Twenty years hadn't dimmed it. How bizarre. "Do you think you're feeling the Cruciatus Curse?"

"Is that possible? Could it still be... on her?" Ginny looked disgusted, but she extended her hands again and ran them over the air above Mrs. Granger. Quickly, she snatched her fingers back and shook them. "Whatever it is, it's all over her," she said. "Is that possible?" she asked again.

"What do you feel? Be specific."

"It's like needles. Hundreds of very sharp needles, very hot—like they're going to burn my hands."

"Yes... but you didn't scream."

"No," Ginny said slowly. "It's bearable pain. Almost. I can't leave my hands there for long, though. I couldn't possibly work on them, through whatever it is."

Remus nodded. "But if I told you to reach out your hands again, you could do it?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

Ginny shrugged and slowly extended her hands once more. She winced, left her hands where they were for several seconds, then drew a hissing breath and pulled her hands back. "That's about it."

"If you can voluntarily leave your hands in it for that long, then it's not the Cruciatus."

Ginny went a little pale. "Then I don't know how people stand it," she said, very quietly. "I know they made people stand it for hours."

"Not hours. Not unbroken hours, anyway. Hours, and you've got madness on your hands." Remus studied Mrs. Granger's horrified face. "Or this. Whatever this is."

"It..." Ginny looked at her hands and pressed her mouth shut. "I think it *is* the Cruciatus," she said. "I worked on someone who had this in his aura. Not exactly like this, much weaker, but I think it's the same."

Remus frowned at her. "Who have you been working on—Harry? I told you—"

"It wasn't Harry," was all Ginny said. She clasped her hands in front of her mouth and stared worriedly down at Mrs. Granger. "If it's really the Cruciatus, and it's all over her body, then she must be just... ruined."

Remus frowned more deeply, trying to remember everything he had ever learned about the long-term effects of serious curses, but nothing came to mind that would explain the Grangers' condition.

Ginny walked around him and over to Mr. Granger's bed, and ran her hands through the air around him. She made a noise like she'd been burnt by scalding hot water, and stepped back. "Same thing here." She looked a bit frightened. "I think it's all over them. The curse has been working on them all this time, I don't know what else it could be."

"No, wait—that's impossible," Remus said, relieved. He had finally remembered something useful. "The hospital curse breakers would have got rid of it if it were an active curse. It's one of the first things they test for here—hexes, potions and curses are all searched for and stripped from the victims. An active curse would have been detected within the first month."

"But it's there. I can feel it." Ginny sounded panicked. She tried to extend her hands again, but pulled them back at once, sucking in another pained breath. "I can't get close enough to help them," she said. "And I can't feel their real energy at all. All I can feel is the curse."

"It's not a curse anymore—it can't be."

"Well then what is it? How can I break it?"

Remus didn't know.

"How can I tell Hermione that the Cruciatus is still all round her mum and dad?" Ginny's voice trembled. "It'll kill her, I know how she is, she won't stop thinking about it."

"It's *not* a curse," Remus repeated, as firmly as he could. "If the Cruciatus had tormented them for a year, they'd be dead, Ginny." He was fairly sure that he was right—if she could put her hands in it, then it was not the Cruciatus, no matter what she thought she could compare it to. Or at least, it was not the Cruciatus in its full measure...

"A residual," he said suddenly.

"What?" Ginny looked up at him.

"A residual—it's like—it's like the ghost of a curse." Remus felt as if he were standing in the library at Hogwarts. Ginny watched him just as James and Sirius and Peter had used to, wide-eyed and ready to make use of every word that came out of his mouth. "Most wizards don't believe in them. The cursologists here at St. Mungo's would be extremely skeptical, I'm sure, but some of the more liberal apothecaries and the ancient eastern sorcerers believe that all magic leaves its own living energy behind it."

"It does!" Ginny said at once. "At Hogwarts—at Seamus and Lavender's wedding—I could feel exactly where everything had happened. I could remember exactly where Voldemort's wand dropped."

Remus nodded, unsurprised. "If that's true, then the Grangers may *not* be in pain. Perhaps what you're feeling is a residual of what they endured."

"How can you say they're not in pain?" Ginny demanded. "Look at their eyes."

"Yes, but they're frozen in a moment in time. They look conscious, but they are not. They *were* in terrible pain, when they lost consciousness, and that is what you see and feel. The pain itself has ebbed away."

"Then... then perhaps if we wait a bit longer, the rest of it will wear off and I'll be able to work on them?"

Remus ran a hand through his hair, pursed his lips and let out a puff of air. "It's very hard to say. Some injuries last forever, even when the pain is gone." Into Remus's mind flashed an old, dark picture. A sharp, white moon. Terrible growling. Yellow eyes and dripping fangs. He winced and continued, mostly to himself. "The residual effects of certain magic can be as bad, in their own way, as the initial traumas."

Ginny gave him a narrow look. Perhaps she knew what he was thinking about, because she didn't ask for further answers. She nodded, and turned her eyes back to Mrs. Granger. "I'm going to tell Hermione what I felt—she should know, no matter what. And she can tell the doctors, and perhaps once they know the residual's there, they can get rid of it. And *then* I'll be able to leave my hands near them long enough to help them."

She sounded so hopeful and determined that Remus could not bring himself to tell her that it seemed impossible. Mediowizards that did not believe in residuals had certainly spent no time developing the spells that could repeal them. "All right," he said. "You don't look as pale as you did. How are you feeling?"

"Better." Ginny rubbed her head. "The longer I stay in a difficult place, the easier it gets. But I'm... not ready for this hospital." She dropped her hands. "I need more practice. More time around the dragons should do it."

Glad that she had recognized a boundary on her own, Remus steered her out of the hospital room. He met her at home and put on the tea. And for the rest of the afternoon, much to his surprise, Ginny distracted herself by reworking her ruined Arithmancy.

* * * * *

Fleur stood under the enormous dome of her bright blue umbrella and rang the third floor bell at number thirteen, Diagon Alley. When there was no immediate answer, Fleur switched the umbrella into her other hand and pulled a card out of her pocket and checked the address. Yes. This was Penelope Clearwater's building. It was a nondescript, stone rowhouse, but Fleur had long ago lost her snobbery where flats were concerned; when she had first moved to Paris she had discovered that what she could afford and what she actually liked were in two very different categories. This row house was in a nice enough area, if it was a bit cramped-looking. And the number thirteen on the building, which hung askew in spidery gothic iron, was somehow beautiful.

Fleur rang the bell again. Again there was no answer, and she began to get irritated. Moreover, she was worried. She didn't want to stand here in the middle of Diagon Alley, in the middle of the rain, where anyone might walk by. Anyone at all.

"Fleur Delacour—is that you?"

Fleur heard the quick clicking of footsteps on wet sidewalk and turned to see two faces she vaguely recognized. They must have been Penelope Clearwater and Hermione Granger, though if it hadn't been for the baby that slept against Penelope's back, Fleur never would have known who was who.

"Are we late?" Penelope asked. "I'm so sorry! We just popped down to The Write Answer for more quills and parchment—"

"Non, I am early," Fleur said.

Hermione, who was holding an umbrella over herself and Penelope, looked rather unsettled. She gave Fleur a smile that wasn't quite convincing.

"Hello," she said. "I'm Hermione Granger. I don't know if you remem—"

"I remember," Fleur lied, and held out her hand first to Hermione and then Penelope. "It is wonderful to see you both again."

"You too! Excuse me, let me just get past you there—thanks—and then we can all get out of this rain and upstairs to work. I love your umbrella, by the way."

Penelope was friendly enough, Fleur decided as they tramped up three very steep flights.

"Feel free to Apparate after this, now you know where it is, and avoid those horrible stairs," Penelope panted, and pushed open the door to her flat. "I only use them because *he*—" she reached over her shoulder and patted her son—"made me fat. Come in, make yourself at home."

Fleur looked around the flat. It was clean, and very simply furnished. Long white curtains hung in the windows and Penelope had polished the wooden floors to a high shine. There was a distinct lack of knick-knacks and clutter—except in a tiny room that Penelope explained was the nursery—and a sense of something quiet and peaceful hung in the air. Fleur liked it.

"Your flat is lovely," she said, as she hung her cloak and umbrella on the set of hooks near the door and took her bag to the table near the windows.

"Thanks." Penelope smiled. "I've only just moved in, so Leo hasn't had time to destroy it. I'm sorry we can't work in a proper office, but there simply isn't room there, for three."

"Oh, it is nothing, I can work anywhere." Fleur thought she saw annoyance flicker across Hermione's face. But the expression was gone so quickly that Fleur decided not to assume anything. "May I see what you are attempting to build?"

Penelope excused herself to put Leo down for a nap before they began, and it was Hermione who retrieved a rolled-up stack of massive, map-sized parchment sheets. She placed them on the table.

Fleur thanked her and unrolled the stack, but frowned at the very first page; these spell maps had been drawn one layer at a time, and she was used to seeing complex spells in overlay. It helped her to visualize what she would have to do, to put it all together. She rolled up the stack of parchment without another look. "There is a map of these together, yes?" she asked.

Hermione gave a slight cough. "You'll want to look through the layers first," she said, a little too slowly. "So you'll recognize what you're looking at when you see it in overlay. It's complicated."

Fleur knew now that she hadn't been imagining things. Hermione didn't like her. "Perhaps you will allow me to judge?" she asked, and watched as Hermione's chin went into the air. It didn't bother her. In Fleur's opinion, there were two kinds of women: those like Penelope, who were confident in themselves and had no fear of her, and those like Hermione, who were afraid.

"Why certainly." Hermione stood and raised her wand. She made several complicated movements, and muttered several spells Fleur did not recognize. A moment later, filling the room, there hung a glittering map, so deep and complex, and involving so many magical paths, that Fleur's mouth hung open.

"Mon *Dieu*," she said, not caring if Hermione had the upper hand. "I 'av never seen..."

"Hermione, give her a chance to look at the layers!" Penelope rebuked as she came back into the room. "Goodness. You'll overwhelm her and she won't want to work with us." She laughed. "But it's beautiful, isn't it? I still can't believe it's finally *finished*. In theory, anyway. We were up all night, drawing the final drafts—Hermione only just discovered the key to the design."

"It was Ron," Hermione protested. "Don't give me credit."

Penelope waved her wand, and the glittering map vanished. "What do you think, Miss Delacour?"

"I think... I will need some hours to study these," said Fleur, touching the rolls of parchment. "And please, call me Fleur."

For the next three hours, they pored over maps and spells, paths and theories, Arithmancy and Thinking. Fleur could not help being impressed by Hermione's apprenticeship, and when she told her as much it seemed to soften her attitude. When lunch rolled around, it was announced by a stomach rumble—no one could work out whose—and a cry from the nursery.

"Everyone's hungry, apparently," Penelope said. "I'll be right back—Hermione, do you and Fleur want to grab lunch and bring it back here? I don't have much in the way of food, and I'm starving—grab money from my coat if you go, would you, and just get me something *big*."

Hermione fished money out of Penelope's cloak. "No, you're fine," she said to Fleur, holding out a hand to stop her from getting up. "Really, I'll get it. Have a look at those last two paths while I'm

gone and then we can look at the overlay again and you can see how it all fits together. What do you want? I'm going to the Lighthouse, they've got sandwiches and pies and soup and things."

"Vegetable soup and a baguette—a roll—it does not matter." Fleur opened her purse, but Hermione waved her off again.

"My treat, it's fine. Thanks for helping with this, I'm—glad you could come." And she was gone, looking a bit red and rather contrite. Fleur sat back in surprise. Perhaps she had misjudged Hermione, who seemed very pleasant after all.

After going over the last two maps, Fleur stood in the empty room to stretch her legs. She looked out of the windows and her eyes strayed to the small, framed pictures on the walls. There were very few. One was a copy of a very pretty painting Fleur did not recognize—she leaned close to the painted lilies to see the name scrawled beneath them. Monet. He had to be a Muggle; she would have recognized the name of any French wizarding painter who was this good. On the far wall hung a photograph of Penelope, asleep with an unbelievably tiny Leo. And beside that hung a picture of a freckled young man in horn-rimmed glasses, who looked very serious, but very happy.

Percy.

Fleur recognized him instantly and her breath caught in her throat. Percy. Percy who had been killed, Percy whose death had brought Bill to Charlie in the middle of a trench, in the middle of a war. Percy who belonged in this flat, with his wife and his son. He smiled quietly out at her and, every so often, he pushed up his glasses. Bill missed him so much—Fleur knew that. And Bill hadn't meant to be awful; Fleur knew that, too. This year had been strange and difficult for everyone, and just when things should have been getting easier they had become stupidly complicated. It had been so uncomplicated, that first night, and so honest. Fleur traced a finger down the frame of Percy's photo and sighed.

"Did you know him?"

Fleur whirled. She hadn't heard Hermione come back—perhaps she had Apparated. "I..." she began. "I remember 'im from the tournament. I know what happened to 'im."

"Did Penny—"

"Non, I found out last year, when it 'appened. I was... putting Diversion Enchantments around the dragon camp, for Sharlie Weasley, when his brother came to tell 'im. I overheard them. I was so sorry."

It seemed to be enough of the truth to satisfy Hermione. She nodded, and glanced down the little corridor toward the nursery. "Here's lunch," she said, and set a bag on the hall table. "Let me get Penny, and we'll get back to it."

They returned to work, but, to Fleur's chagrin, the afternoon was a long series of frustrating failures. Hermione had brought a large beetle, which they were using as the "prisoner", and so far, the prisoner had escaped from every attempt Fleur had made.

She stopped and tied back her hair, determined to conquer the spell. She hoped they could not see how worried she was—it should have been nothing at all to erect a palm-sized miniature of a spell, and that was all she wanted to create. A little model should have taken minutes, at most. Fleur had always managed to put up fully functional spells within a few hours of first seeing them drawn, and she had a knack for mastering the most difficult charms, like Diversion Enchantments, in a few days' time. No miniature of any kind had *ever* given her trouble. But the Imprisonment Enchantment was so complicated that Fleur could hardly keep all its layers in her mind together at once. It was imperative that she do so, or nothing could be built, but bits of it kept slipping out of her grasp. No magic had ever been so difficult for her, but she continued to build, narrowing her focus, unwilling to admit defeat.

When the beetle finally crashed into thin air and splinched, Fleur let out an undignified shout of victory and slumped back in her chair.

"It works!" Hermione squeaked and, to Fleur's astonishment, Penelope burst into tears. "Oh, Penny, Penny, what's the matter—"

"It's just that P-Percy and I w-wanted to do this and we worked so h-hard... and now it's r-real—" Penelope put her hands over her face, and Hermione hugged her.

Fleur watched them, feeling very tired and more than a little out of place. But she put a hand on Penelope's elbow, knowing from her own experience that even the smallest comforts were always worth giving. Even if Penelope was still a relative stranger, she had been Percy's wife. And Percy was Bill's brother. And that connected them.

"He'd be so happy," Penelope sobbed. "I hope he can s-see this."

"He can," Hermione assured her.

"Of course 'e can," Fleur chimed in.

"Oh, Fleur, I'm sorry—let me pull myself together—" Penelope wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands.

Fleur Summoned the tissues. "Non, take your time. But I will give you privacy. And I will come back to try this again tomorrow, yes?"

"Yes," said Penelope and Hermione together, at once, as the free half of the beetle scuttled to the edge of the table and fell onto the floor.

"And... if I may suggest something?"

Hermione glanced at her. "Go on."

"The spell can be built, and it works—it is wonderful." Fleur smiled at Penelope. "But per'aps it would be wise to make certain it cannot be broken down, before it is put into effect? I am not an expert at breaking charms, only at building them..." She trailed off, wondering just how obvious she was being, but neither Penelope nor Hermione seemed to have any clue what her motives were.

"She's right," Hermione said, and let go of Penny to chew on her fingernail. "You know, Bill's done with all his work at Gringotts, and he's got loads of experience. If anyone could break this, he could. I'm sure he'd love to help."

"Of course, Bill!" Penelope wiped her eyes again and gave Fleur a watery smile. "Bill Weasley is my brother-in-law. He's a Curse Breaker for Gring—"

"Wait, didn't you work together at Gringotts?" Hermione cut in, and suddenly her eyes were very keen. "You already know him, don't you?"

Fleur searched for words, but found none, and Hermione was still talking.

"I remember Ron saying something in a letter, something about Bill and..." Hermione stopped. Her eyes widened, and her mouth twitched.

Fleur wondered if the room had suddenly overheated or if she'd gone crimson.

"Yes, let's do ask Bill to help us," Hermione said, after she'd regained her composure. "I'm going over to the Weasleys' tonight for supper, and all the boys are supposed to be there, so I'll ask him tonight. Will you be there, Penelope?"

"No, I had lunch with Molly yesterday and I'm a little worn out right now, to be honest."

Hermione nodded, and looked up at Fleur. "Well then, would *you* like to come along? I'm sure no one would mind." She grinned. "Mrs. Weasley's always up for more company."

Fleur wanted to say yes, but she didn't know how, and the idea of walking into Bill's house uninvited and unexpected terrified her. So she shook her head.

"You're sure?"

Fleur nodded.

"Well all right." Hermione stood and patted Penelope's shoulder. "Perhaps next time. I'm going to go and find Ron and head down to the Burrow. I'll see you both tomorrow."

"Yes, tomorrow," Fleur echoed, and Disapparated from Penelope's flat so distracted about what tomorrow might hold that she forgot both her umbrella and her cloak.

* * * * *

"Put that down, dear." Molly hid a triumphant smile as Max instantly laid down the wand he'd picked up from the kitchen table. "You'll have a wand of your own soon enough."

Late sunlight pierced the kitchen windows and filled the Burrow; it was Molly's favorite kind of light and tonight she felt strangely content. She had expected Penelope's move to Diagon Alley to distress her, but it hadn't. Not much. Perhaps it was because, when Penelope had brought Leo to visit yesterday, she had looked happier than she had in months. Perhaps it was the fact that the Weasley children were coming together for dinner tonight, for the first time since Christmas.

Or perhaps Max was keeping her young. She hadn't expected to like him quite so much.

"I want my old wand," he said. "It *chose* me."

"Of course you want your old wand." Molly patted his shoulder. "Ebony, thirteen inches, dragon heartstring?"

Max's jaw dropped. "How did you—"

"St. Mungo's confiscated it, dear, they didn't burn it up. I have it."

"WHERE?"

Molly laughed. "It isn't in the house, so there's no point in tearing the place apart."

"Well, when can I have it?" he demanded.

"In September, when Hogwarts opens again." She licked her thumb and rubbed out a spot of dirt on Max's temple before he could dart away.

"Hey—that's disgusting!" Max rubbed at his forehead, scowling. "What makes you think I'll still

be here in September?"

"Instinct." Molly smiled at him, and Max looked like he wanted very much to smile back, but he only tossed his head.

"Well I'm not going back to that stupid school, you can forget it."

"Then there won't be any need to give back your wand." Molly held out a wooden spoon, covered in sauce. "Taste?"

Max gingerly sipped from the spoon. "More salt."

Molly turned to the table for the salt shaker, and was pleased to see Arthur in the doorway, leaning against the frame.

"I see I'm obsolete," he said. "You have a new taster."

"He's much more decisive than you are," Molly said, and handed Max the salt. "And a better cook."

Max half-smiled, and gave the salt several confident shakes over the pot.

"Run along and wash your hands, dear," Molly said, when he'd finished. "We'll eat in an hour, when everyone's here."

Max's sandy eyebrows came together. "Everyone? That girl isn't coming, is she?"

"What, Hermione?"

"No, that stupid Healer."

Molly pursed her lips. "My daughter's name is *Ginny*," she said tightly, "and though you won't give us *your* proper name, I'll thank you to respect other people's."

"If she's coming, I'm not eating."

"Then I'm afraid you're going to be very hungry."

Max pulled a horrible face; he pushed past Arthur, stomped out of the room and ran up the stairs. Molly rubbed the bridge of her nose between her thumb and index finger.

"Just when I think I've got him sorted out," she said, and sighed.

Arthur smiled a little. "We've got him more sorted than you think," he said. "He's—"

"He's impossible. He won't tell us anything, not even what *House* he was in, and he's the best liar I've ever met. He never slips up, I don't know *how* we're going to—"

"Molly," Arthur said patiently. "I think I have his name."

Molly felt excited and cold all at once. To know Max better—to really help him—she would have to know his identity and his past. But the chances that his parents were dead, or in prison, were very high, and the chances that he didn't *know* what had happened to his parents were even higher. How would she break the news to him, whatever it was? It was a question that had bothered her ever since she and Arthur had decided to hold onto him.

"Well?" she said.

"Adam Mercury Hopewell, Junior," Arthur said. "I'm almost positive. I sent pictures to McGonagall, and she identified him and sent back copies of all his papers." Arthur placed a thick file on the table. "She isn't positive, but several of the teachers concur and I contacted several of the families in his year, to see if any of them recognized him. Only one woman—Margaret Pucey—wrote that her youngest son, Damian, was a friend of Adam's. No one else answered, but that's probably because the rest of the families in his old circle aren't keen on giving me information of any kind."

Molly's heart sank. "Then—his parents?"

"In Culparrat. Tried and convicted."

Tears came fast, and Molly was unprepared. "Poor thing," she mumbled, and Arthur came around the table to hug her. She hugged back, brokenhearted for Adam—if he *was* Adam. "Does he know?"

"No. He wasn't lying when he said that he was informed that they'd been killed. Under Fudge's direction, many children of arrested Death Eaters were given false information on their parents' whereabouts when they were taken to the children's home. It was decided that they were too young to know the truth."

Molly pulled away. "How do we tell him?"

"I have no idea." Arthur took the file from the table and handed it to Molly; she opened it and paged through Adam Hopewell's identification, report cards, selected assignments, and Head of House reports.

"Slytherin," she said quietly. "Well, it's not exactly shocking."

"The Hopewells are related to the Malfoys, actually. Adam's father is Lucius's second cousin, once removed. It's distant, but the connection is there."

"Then... if he's Adam... then he has living relatives."

"Yes."

"Who might want him."

"It's possible."

"Arthur, they'll ruin him."

Arthur gently moved Molly's hair away from her face. "Your sauce is boiling." He went to stir it as Molly continued to sift through Adam's file.

"Look at these marks. These are like Percy's old marks—or Bill's. He must have been top of his year."

"I know it."

Molly put down the file. "Arthur, he's doing so well here. He's doing well with us, and with his lessons, and with—with behaving like a child *ought* to behave. And his relatives, whoever they are—if they're the kind of people who won't even give you information, then they'd adopt him just for spite, even if they didn't want him—and he can't be asked to adjust again, it isn't fair to him—"

"I know." Arthur gave her a long look. "But let's wait until we're sure of who he is, and then speak with him about what he wants, before we get the world involved."

Molly nodded. She looked down at the table and dragged her fingers across the top of the file. "I suppose I've grown rather attached, is the thing."

"So have I."

"Well, I knew *you* were going to like him the minute he took an interest in your ridiculous plugs." Molly let out a wistful breath. "I'm sure I should be tired of raising children, but I'm so glad that Ron brought him here—as much trouble as he is, if there were six more of him I don't think I'd mind. Am I mad?"

Arthur laughed. "Molly," he said affectionately. He laid the long spoon across the top of the pot and took her by the shoulders. Molly tilted up her chin and marveled that she could still feel like a fifth year, when they stood together like this. Glasses and lines and thinning hair had done nothing to diminish her husband's charms.

"Oh, Arthur—"

A catcall from the front room distracted them both; Molly turned and squinted through the open kitchen door to see Bill throwing his things onto the sofa and grinning.

"No, don't let me interrupt," he called. "Smells great in here, Mum. When's dinner?"

"Whenever your brothers and sister get here—" Molly stood on tiptoe and quickly kissed her husband; he squeezed her shoulders and let go. "And Bill, dear," she called, "would you please go upstairs and see if you can get Adam—that is, Max—to come down and eat?"

Bill strode to the kitchen, frowning. "What'd you just call him?"

Molly shushed him. "I didn't mean to shout. Your father's had a letter from Minerva McGonagall."

Bill lowered his voice. "Really? Have we got Max's identity, Dad?"

Arthur handed Bill the file and explained the situation; Bill paged through Adam Hopewell's papers, pulled out a report card and whistled again. "Quite a brain on that one. All right then—what if I try to slip his name into conversation tonight and see if he answers to it?"

"He'll never fall for that," Molly said, but Bill waved a careless hand.

"HHHh e likes me, he'll answer me." He gave an easy smile and went about lighting the lamps; the sun had finished setting, and the house was growing dark. "He's got good taste, if he's got a bad temper."

"Well, he certainly doesn't like your sister," Molly said, feeling very huffy about it. "That's why he won't come down to dinner. And I can't see why—"

"It's just because she practiced on him in front of everyone, at Christmas. He didn't want to be called out like that about his parents. He didn't think it was fair. He's scared she'll try it again."

Molly blinked. "Did he tell you all that?"

"Not in so many words." Bill shrugged. "But he mentioned something the last time I was here, and I can't say I blame him. That was quite an audience for something so personal—say, can I taste that for you?"

Molly shared a guilty look with Arthur while Bill helped himself to the sauce. "I tried to talk to Max—that is, to Adam—on Christmas night," she said quietly. "But he wouldn't answer me. I didn't know it still bothered him so much."

Arthur pushed up his glasses. "Well. The only one who can set it right is Ginny, and once she knows there's a breach to heal, I'm sure she'll want to try."

"She's been on the warpath about Healing everything lately, hasn't she?" Bill shook his head and opened another simmering pot. "Charlie keeps me up to date on how she's handling Azkaban—all

those dragons—not to mention she brewed the Wolfsbane Potion twice last month. Someone needs to slow her down, or she'll get sick. She's an amateur. I've been doing some reading—want me to have a chat with her?"

"According to Sirius, Remus already lectured her this morning." Arthur clapped Bill on the shoulder. "So go ahead and see if you can get Adam to answer to his name, and leave Ginny to us for now."

"Lectured her?" Molly slapped Bill's hand away from sausage pan and clapped a lid onto it. "Is she falling behind on her schoolwork?"

"Not yet," Arthur said, "but it seems she's determined to take on another project. She spent the morning at St. Mungo's."

"Well, that's a natural place for a Healer to take up work," said Bill, thumping into a chair and attempting to break a bit of crust off the massive apple pie that sat beside Adam's file. Molly slapped his hand again. "Ow! Mum—"

"Have a glass of water." Molly set one before him. "Don't spoil your appetite."

"She spent the morning at St. Mungo's," Arthur repeated, "because she's taken it into her head that she can wake Hermione's parents."

Molly gasped. "Arthur!" She stared at him. "Is that possible?"

"According to Ron it's not *impossible*, and he's certainly done his research—do you know, it was Ron who researched the Hopewells for me, today? It took him no time at all, and his notes! Painstaking, I mean it. I'll have to show them to you."

"Hermione's good for him," Bill said. "So's working with Sirius."

"Yes, and I'm glad he's there. With those two heading up the justice department and Moody running Culparrat, I'm well satisfied. Charlie and Mick have Azkaban under control, and Rose Brown does the work of three with the Privy Council—oh, there's work yet to do, but it's coming together." Arthur smiled, and Molly was thrilled to see that it was a real smile, not one of the tired, tight ones he'd been giving for so long. "It's really coming together. I can hardly believe it. I'll be calling for Privy Council elections soon—it really seems time to elect new P.C.s, and once they're installed they can prepare to select the Magical Advisory and the Minister of Magic."

"You're going to open debates on a new Minister right off?" Bill frowned.

"Well, it's time to get the thing sorted out," said Arthur, looking unconcerned. "If the P.C.s select me, I'll be happy to continue on at the Ministry, but I can't remain the default Minister forever, not now that our corner of the wizarding world is nearly healthy again. People deserve—"

"You're not default," Bill said stoutly. "You've done a brilliant job."

"Now, Bill, don't give me more credit than I'm due, when we're all doing our parts. You've been a great help to Gringotts and to me." He smiled. "Perhaps *you'd* like to run for Privy Council?"

Bill shook his head, but he looked very pleased, and Molly was reminded of all the times he'd helped his father on projects as a child. He'd usually be standing on a stepstool in the garage, holding onto some Muggle contraption while Arthur pulled and tugged at it. Arthur's hair had been thicker then, and Bill's had been... short. She reached out and smoothed his hair, instinctively running a hand over his ponytail. "How long do you plan—" she began, but Bill seemed to know what was coming.

"I'm keeping it forever, Mum. I'm not cutting it off." He gave her a quick kiss on the forehead. "I'm going to go and see if I can get Max down here for dinner, all right?"

"I'm down here." They all turned to see Max in the door, washed and dressed, his eyes fixed on Bill. "I heard your voice. Where's everyone else?"

"Not here yet."

Max looked satisfied. "Did you bring the mummy dust, like you said?"

"Absolutely."

"Cool." Max followed Bill into the front room, where they sat on the floor on either side of Bill's knapsack. Molly and Arthur moved closer to the kitchen door, in order to overhear the conversation.

"Want to see the dust first, or would you rather read a bit about the mummy, so you know what you're touching?" Bill handed Max an enormous book. "Page nine hundred and twelve—and this is sixth year level Defense reading, so let me know if you need any help."

Max snorted, opened the book, and became immediately absorbed. "Oh wow," he murmured, after a few minutes. "Did they really bury two hundred living people with him?"

"Isn't that amazing?"

"Yeah. And was he really a wizard, or was he what Muggles think a wizard is?"

"Really a wizard—although what Muggles think isn't always so far off the mark."

Max shook his head and put the book aside. "All right, show me the dust."

Bill pulled a very small, silver box from the front pouch of his knapsack and held it between his finger and thumb. "Be careful when you open it—you don't want to inhale this. It's ancient, and it's powerful. You have to respect it, got that?"

Max nodded, obviously enchanted, and took the box. He opened it with extreme care and peered in.

"Great. Now put the box in my palm, and dip each of your index fingers into it. I'm going to teach you how to make a protective amulet, right in your skin. It's called a Dermulet. You'll learn about it in sixth year, but you'll be the only one in your class who really knows what's going on."

Max did as he was told, and held up both his index fingers, covered in gray dust.

"Now rub it into the backs of your hands until it's in your skin—that's it, Adam—and hold your hands out, palms down. I'll tell you what to say."

Adam continued to obey without flinching at the sound of his name, and Bill's eyes flickered to the kitchen door for an instant before returning to Adam's face. Molly took Arthur's hand and gripped it.

"It's him," she said quietly.

"Yes."

"We'll have to tell him." Molly leaned her head on Arthur's shoulder and tried to imagine telling Adam Mercury Hopewell, aged twelve, that his parents were alive and well and stunned in Culparrat, where they would remain for life. She heard him chanting in strange Egyptian with Bill, and wondered how many amulets it would take to ward off the terrible shock he was going to get.

"That's it," Bill said finally. "You're under the protection of Hathor now."

"So I can do whatever I want!"

"No, no. You can't go testing your Dermulet or it'll backfire—nasty business, ancient magic when it backfires. It's just there if you need it. And it'll help you at the oddest times."

"Have you got one too, then?"

Bill held up the backs of his hands. "Saved my life in the pyramids twice, I'm telling you."

Adam looked impressed. He tossed his head and threw back his sandy fringe. "Thanks." He paused. "You know how you said I might be allowed to invite a few of my friends to stay here?"

Bill's eyes flickered to the kitchen door again and his face flushed a little. "Erm. Yes?"

"Oh, he didn't *dare*," Molly whispered, trying to feel angry at Bill for having promised something so outrageous. But it didn't feel so outrageous. Instead, she felt a flutter of excitement. Hope.

"What do you think?" Adam pressed. "Could you ask about it for me?"

Bill considered him. "If you want to know the answer to that one, then you're going to have to ask about it yourself."

"Ah." Arthur squeezed Molly's waist. "Seems we're in for an interrogation."

"Well we don't have to answer him *now*," Molly answered slowly, an idea forming in her mind. "And you don't have to answer me now... but what if..." She gave him a pleading look. "What if? Arthur, there are so many of them, and I know we couldn't take them all, but it's a big enough house and I've got time on my hands—and we're still so young."

Arthur looked down at her and his glasses slid partway down his nose. "You want another house full, don't you?" He shook his head. "You really are the maddest woman I've ever known."

"But we'll talk it over later?" Molly said, knowing, from the expression in his eyes, that the talk would end in her favor. And Adam's.

"Yes." Arthur kissed her. "We'll talk it over later. Now, where are the rest of the first batch? Weren't they supposed to be here by seven? It's quarter past, and I'm starving—"

Arthur was interrupted by a raucous noise from the garden. The front door flew open and a blast of happy chatter, carried on a gust of frozen air, filled the Burrow. Molly watched cloaks fly onto hooks and heard Ron's wail of deepest despair that the Cannons had lost their first match of the season to the Falmouth Falcons. She pretended not to see Hermione shut his mouth with a kiss, and watched instead as Ginny, looking very tired, sat on the sofa beside Harry, who looked just as exhausted. Fred went straight to the wireless and turned on music. Charlie and George hunkered down beside Bill and Adam, and Adam began to describe, to his new audience, the amazing magic he'd just performed.

It wasn't long before Ron started moaning about Quidditch again, but Hermione didn't try to help this time. She gave him a pat on the shoulder, left him to Harry, and approached Molly and Arthur.

"Well?" asked Arthur, rubbing his hands together. "How did it go?"

"How did what go?" Molly asked.

"These wonderful girls..." Arthur said, squeezing Hermione's shoulder and looking around the

room. "Where's Penny?"

"She's a little tired," Hermione said. "But don't worry, it's a good thing."

"Right," said Arthur, looking pleased. "This wonderful girl, and our daughter-in-law, came to my office last night with the most impressive diagrams I've ever seen. I couldn't make heads or tails of them, of course, but I'm sure they're very good." Arthur grinned. "Did they work?"

"Have you really designed a working spell?" Bill asked, entering the room and looking eager. Adam trailed in behind him, and Molly threw the boy an encouraging smile. He scowled in return. "Has it been tested?" Bill continued. "Can I help with anything?"

"Well," Hermione said. "We've had to hire a professional Charmer to help us with the spell construction. It's too complicated to for us to actually build. We needed someone with experience working with large boundaries—things like Hogwarts, or... well, like Gringotts vaults."

"Oh?" Bill said, looking suddenly very eager. "I can recommend some people who work for Gringotts, if you like."

"The Charmer we've hired seems to be very, very good. Today was only her first day, and she seemed positive that it could be done, with time. Actually, she's recently worked at Gringotts in London—perhaps she was one of the people you were going to recommend?"

Bill somehow managed to knock a water glass over and spill it onto Adam, who shrieked and ran out of the room, only to be caught by Ron and forced to join the Quidditch conversation. "No, I don't think I... I don't know her."

"Bill!" Molly said. "You haven't even heard her name! How can you say you don't know her?"

"It's all right," Hermione said. She didn't seem to mind Bill's behavior. In fact, she was grinning from ear to ear. "Gringotts is a very large place. You *will* come and help us when it's time to try to break the charm, though, won't you Bill? We could really use a skilled Curse-Breaker. Several, actually. So if you think of anyone else..."

"If it's someone with Gringotts experience, then you won't need to worry too much," Bill answered. He sat down on a kitchen chair. "Sure... I'll help. Just let me know when you need me." He looked pale, and Molly wondered if he'd inhaled any of the mummy dust he'd given to Adam.

"Is there anything I can help with, Mrs. Weasley?" Hermione asked.

"I was just going to ask that!" Angelina said, heading into the kitchen.

"No, no, girls, but thank you. Go and relax!" Her heart lighter than it had been in a year, Molly leaned against her husband and gazed at her children and their closest friends as they commandeered her house and rendered it a home.

* * * * *

"It's that time again."

Malfoy's voice rang in Harry's ear, though he and Mordor were still out of sight, and Harry gritted his teeth. *I hate you*, he thought. *I hate your bloody guts. You better just fly back to camp, because if you come around the side of that prison right now and show your face, then I'm going to have to break your neck.*

A red dragon soared into view, breathing a stream of fire. It would have been a fantastic sight but for the dragon's rider, whose leer was visible from thirty yards away. Harry clenched the handles of his seat and willed Malfoy to fall. *I won't help you, this time. You can drown, for all I care.*

"Well, well, Potter. Looking *peaky*, I must say. A little young for the white hair, aren't you? If only your girlfriend had time to take better care of you."

Harry hated the communications charm that they had to use. He hated that Malfoy's voice, dripping with sarcasm, seemed to echo in his head. He would not rise to it. There was no point in rising to it. "Your shift's not over," he said. "You've got five minutes until Lisa gets out here. Get back in your place before something happens."

"Oh, something's going to happen, all right," Malfoy said, his voice quiet and suggestive. "But not until I get to *shore*."

It was a load of crap, and Harry knew it, but the suggestion was enough to make his insides writhe. "Get back in your place," he repeated. "Before a Dementor—"

"I'm well aware of my place," Malfoy said, "and it isn't here, working with paupers and idiots."

"Then sod off," Harry spat. There. He'd risen to it, and he didn't care. It felt good to shout. He wanted to shout—wanted to let Malfoy have it—wanted to pull his wand and let go of the control he'd been keeping so carefully.

Malfoy smiled. "Not quite yet," he said. "There's no replacement for me, the new riders are still in training. And I wouldn't want to abandon the Ministry's mighty cause. Why, something terrible might happen."

"GET IN YOUR SPOT, MALFOY!" Mick's shout, in both their heads, made both of them jump. Malfoy looked supremely irritated for having been startled. He tossed his head and muttered something under his breath about Irish people, but steered Mordor around. He looked over his shoulder at Harry, before flying out of sight.

"Enjoy the rest of your shift, Potter," he said. "I know *I* will."

And he was gone, leaving a smoke screen behind him. Harry knew it couldn't have been deliberate—Malfoy couldn't have forced Mordor to blow a wall of black smoke—but the timing was perfect. It surrounded Norbert and blinded Harry. He could not make out Azkaban, and his thoughts turned to Ginny, who would be climbing onto Malfoy's broom again in a few minutes. Ginny, who hadn't said much to him lately, because she said she was tired of defending herself. It had been nearly two weeks since they had all gone over to the Weasleys' house for supper, and since then, he had hardly seen Ginny at all. Malfoy certainly spent more time alone with her than Harry did.

Malfoy touched her more than Harry did.

Harry felt cold and dizzy. He gripped the seat handles again, and shut his eyes, trying to maintain his balance. He felt dangerously close to passing out; he moaned a little and turned his head to escape the imaginary pictures that wouldn't stop plaguing him. He wondered what it meant that his mother's voice had been drowned out lately by this new horror, this vision of Malfoy holding Ginny close against him, putting his mouth on her neck. Ginny never stopped him, in the visions. Harry's stomach clenched.

"You all right there, Harry?"

Lisa. Harry opened his eyes to see her flying around from Malfoy's side of the prison, looking concerned. The air was completely clear now; the smoke screen had vanished and Malfoy had obviously completed his shift. Harry looked around in a panic, and wondered how long he'd had his eyes closed. "I'm fine," he said quickly. "I'm fine—just have a—a headache."

Lisa frowned, but left him alone and resumed her post.

Harry pushed up his glasses and realized that he was sweating. He saw a dark shape out of the corner of his eye and spun to face it—but there was nothing there. Dementors were everywhere, lately. The two hours after Draco went to work with Ginny always seemed, to Harry, to take weeks. He could barely keep his eyes open, and fighting sometimes seemed impossible. Even when he saw Dementors, he found it very difficult to summon his Patronus.

Another dark shape below sent Harry into a dive—at least Norbert was behaving himself again—and this time he wasn't imagining things. It was a Dementor, leaving the prison and moving fast across the water. Harry hadn't seen one move with such determination in a long time. It almost looked as if it were pursuing something.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" he cried, but Prongs did not appear. Nothing but a silvery wisp issued from Harry's wand. He urged Norbert to dive lower, and tried to come up with a happy memory that would clear his mind. It was harder to do, now that thoughts of Ginny had the opposite effect. *Dudley at the cinema, Dudley at the cinema, Dudley at the cinema...*

"*Expecto Patronum!*"

Prongs galloped forth in full force and knocked the Dementor back to where it belonged. Harry rose into the air again, panting as he fished a bit of chocolate out of his front vest pocket. He hoped there would be no more attempted escapes today; he didn't think he was up for another one.

"O'Malley, is everyone all right?"

The voice in Harry's ear was unfamiliar and sharp with worry, and he tensed. One of the dragon keepers at shore was talking to them. That was unusual.

"Yeah?" Mick's voice was unconcerned.

"We've got a situation—a Dementor's on shore. It must've slipped past you—"

"WHAT?" Mick's voice was harsh and loud. Harry winced. "What are you talking about?"

But Harry thought he knew. In the haze of smoke that had surrounded him several minutes before, anything might have slipped by. And, he recalled with a pang of guilt, he *had* felt unnaturally cold. Dizzy. He'd felt exactly as if a Dementor were beside him, but he had done nothing about it; he'd been unable to see or act. It was on the tip of his tongue to take the blame when Mick's voice cut in again, still too loud for comfort.

"Bloody Malfoy, I swear to God, I *told* him to stay in his spot—"

"Mick, could you tone it down?" Lisa sounded annoyed. "I've got eardrums, you know—John, do you want me to ride in and guide that Dementor back out here, or what?"

"No, we'll do it on broomstick, you stay where you are. It's taken care of, I just wanted to be sure none of your dragons had thrown you."

"No injuries out here," Lisa said. "Mark it down though, Charlie's going to want to hear about this."

"But everyone on shore is fine?" Harry asked abruptly. "No one was hurt?"

There was a short pause, and when the dragon keeper spoke again he sounded slightly nervous. "No—Mr. Potter—er, that is, everyone on shore is just fine." He paused again. "So that's it then. Phaedra's on her way out there, and she's driving the Dementor, you should see her any minute."

Harry heard an angry exhale, which he assumed was Mick's, and then the Communications Charm went dead in his ear.

Thankfully, there were no further incidents at sea, but Harry couldn't stop thinking about Ginny, onshore with a Dementor—it could have hurt her and *he* had let it past—the very idea made him sick at heart. He couldn't wait until his shift was over. He needed to see her and be sure that she was really all right.

When he flew to shore two hours later, however, he had to fight down another pang of sickness. He could see them from the air, Ginny and Malfoy, standing just outside Mordor's enclosure, deep in conversation. Harry made a very bad landing and hurried past the equipment tent toward Mordor's pen, stopping when he heard his name.

"Harry has nothing to do with this." Ginny's back was to Harry and her hands were on her hips. "Never mind, I didn't think you'd say yes. I won't have time anyway, what with the dragons."

Realizing they hadn't seen him yet, Harry stepped back and waited. What didn't he have anything to do with? Say yes to *what*? What in the hell was she talking about?

"I am not some test animal, Weasley," Malfoy hissed. "How dare you presume... that I... that I would be... *available* for your practice like a subject for hire..." Malfoy's eyes strayed over Ginny's shoulder. His gaze fell on Harry and he trailed off. "But on second thought... yes."

Ginny leaned forward a little. "Yes?"

"Are you deaf, Weasley?"

"No," Ginny snapped. "So... when?"

Malfoy smiled at Harry, and returned his eyes to Ginny's face. "Now."

"Oh—well, good!" Ginny said, and Harry felt as if the world had just been yanked from beneath his feet. "Where should we go?"

Malfoy paused. His eyes flicked back to Harry, but only for an instant, and raised his voice a little. "Somewhere private."

"All right—where then?"

Harry couldn't breathe. Ginny was agreeing to meet Malfoy. In private. She sounded *happy* about it. And she had sought him out; this had been her idea.

"There's an inn at Stornoway, but—"

"Does it have a pub?" Malfoy demanded.

"Yes."

"Then we'll go there." Malfoy pulled off his riding gloves and began to remove his gear. "Why hello, Potter—how long *have* you been standing there?"

Ginny whirled. "Harry!" she said. But that was all. She looked a bit shocked.

Harry just stared at her.

"I'm going to change," Malfoy said, after a pause. "I'll meet you at the pub, Weasley." He strode away, leaving Harry and Ginny in their difficult silence.

Harry had a feeling that he was supposed to break the silence and that it was his job, as a proper boyfriend, to say something that would not sound like an accusation. "So you're... going out with Malfoy," he managed.

Ginny's eyes went from shocked to disbelieving. "Going out?" she repeated.

"To the pub." Harry was sure he'd said exactly the wrong thing. The trouble was, he couldn't think of anything else to say, and his head still swam with horrible images. He and Ginny had set aside Sunday for a Valentine's Day outing—she'd said that Harry got to pick the place, this time, since Faeryland hadn't exactly been his style. They were supposed to spend the afternoon at a Cannons match. But he wasn't certain he wanted to spend the day watching Quidditch with Ginny, knowing that she would just as easily go to a pub with Malfoy.

You know that's not the truth, said a voice deep in Harry's mind. *You know her better than that*. But he ignored it. He was angry and tired, and the Dementors had taken their toll.

"We're not going for friendly drinks, if that's what's worrying you," she said, and she gave a bit of a laugh. "I've asked him to let me do a bit of practice on him."

"Oh." That didn't help at all. "So you... you want to practice on Malfoy."

"No, I don't *want* to—Harry—" Ginny pushed her hair back; it was very windblown. Harry wondered if Malfoy had ever had to touch it. To get it out of his way. He winced, and wished he could stop being so morbidly curious.

"But you're going to."

"Not really. I mean, yes, I can use the practice, but you don't know what it's like up there with him. I have to get his energy sorted out a bit—he's a mess. It's too hard to hold him off and work on the dragons at the same time." She smiled a little. "But I told *him* it was for practice because I can't imagine he'd take well to being told that he's a mess. I'm surprised he didn't say no anyway—he probably only said yes because he saw you standing there and he knew it would annoy you." Ginny touched Harry's arm. "Please don't let it upset you. I don't really care why he said yes, I just have to do it and get it out of the way, all right?" She sighed and dropped her hand. "Could you not look at me like that?"

Harry looked away. He didn't know how he was looking at her. He didn't really want to look at her, at the moment. He had a feeling he was being unfair, but he wasn't sure how to stop.

"Do you at least understand what I'm doing? It's business."

He nodded. Of course it was business. Her business, and Malfoy's. Not his. He wanted to get far away from her, and from all of it.

"You know, I can tell when you're lying."

Harry looked at her, startled. Had she been reading his feelings again? "Huh?"

"You're a really bad liar. So if you're going to doubt me, then could you do it at home? Because I'm tired." And she really looked it.

"I don't... doubt you," he attempted. Harry knew he had to salvage this before it got worse. He took a step closer to her. "It's him I don't trust. Even if he's only doing this to get at me, he's still doing it, and it's still... it's still *you*." Harry wasn't sure what he meant. He grabbed for one of her hands.

Ginny let him hold it. She studied his eyes for a moment. "That's right, it's me," she said. "Are you all right? What happened with that Dementor?"

Harry looked down. "I think it was my fault that it got past."

"Stop that."

"No, it really—there was a smoke cloud, and I *felt* the Dementor there but I..." Harry shrugged. "I just couldn't fight it."

Ginny looked very concerned. "You couldn't fight at all?"

He was too embarrassed to repeat himself.

"Did you tell anyone?"

He gave her a swift, warning look. "No."

"Harry..." Ginny shifted her weight. She looked uncomfortable. "Look, I know how you feel, but if they've worn you down that much, then you *have* to take a break. You could get hurt."

He kept hold of her hand and said nothing. He couldn't quit the job. And he didn't want to let her go. He knew that, as soon as he did, she would be in Stornoway with Malfoy.

"Will you at least think about it?"

He nodded once, just barely. It wasn't a lie. He was thinking about it now, even if he didn't plan to think about it after this.

"We're still on for Sunday, aren't we?"

He made himself return her smile. "Yes."

"Good." Ginny looked both ways, kissed him very quickly, and let go of his hand. "See you later." She pulled her wand. "Oh—and if you see Remus and he asks where I've gone, please don't tell him. I don't need another lecture, all right?"

Ginny twisted her wand and was gone.

* * * * *

The Leaping Fish tavern in Stornoway was small and dark, and smelled like its name. Ginny tried breathing through her mouth, but felt she could taste the odor, and went back to using her nose. She spotted the back of Draco's head across the pub and knew he'd be peevish about sitting in a place like this. It simply wasn't *done*. She wasn't sure how many times she'd been told, in the past several weeks, that such and such a thing "simply wasn't done," but she was getting tired of hearing it. A lot of things that Draco believed "weren't done" were things Ginny considered normal and good—it was sad, in a way.

Strangely, she had begun to think of him as Draco. She wasn't sure when it had happened. Perhaps it was simply that she couldn't stay impersonal when she was inside a person's aura. It

was, she realized, something worth practicing; professional distance was a skill she would need to sharpen. And Draco—no, *Malfoy*—would be the perfect target. There were many reasons that she wanted to work on him. She hadn't been entirely honest with Harry; it was true that she needed to clear a space for herself, but it was equally as true that she was compelled to help Draco, no matter how little she liked him. She had read about Healers who had been as drawn to their enemies as they were to their friends, and it made sense to her, but she knew that it wouldn't to Harry.

There was one other reason that she wanted to do this—a reason Harry would have despised more than any of the others. Draco's aura was more like Harry's than either of them would have cared to know. He was overwhelming, like Harry. Dark and troubled, like Harry. But where Harry's heart was open, Draco's was walled and hard. While Harry had a hold on her, Draco had none. And so, while it hurt Ginny to open up to Harry, it was almost painless to open up to Draco—exhausting and uncomfortable, but not excruciating. Good practice, really.

Ginny weaved her way through the little tables, put her cloak over the chair across from Draco, and sat down facing him. In his hand he had a short, empty glass.

"Are you going to drink?" she asked. There was nothing in her books about working on people who were under the influence, and she wondered if it was entirely ethical. She had begun to rethink her ethics after Bill had given her a few pointed words about working on children.

"Well I'm not doing this sober, am I?" Draco snorted. "Who in their right mind would sit in this hell hole with *you*?"

"Fine." *You ignorant arse*. Ginny sat up straight and placed her hands palms-down on the table. She began to raise them, but Draco interrupted.

"Why do you want to do this?" he barked. "Is it to irritate Potter? Are you having a lovebird spat? I refuse to be part of it, if that's all it is."

Ginny put her hands down. "Irritate him? What, on purpose? He's my friend."

"Friend?" Draco laughed. "Not trying to make him jealous, are you, Weasley?"

She took a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling. This was going to be horrible. Every day with him was horrible. But she had to try. "No. I asked you because I knew you'd be... a challenge."

He smirked. "Yes. After spending all day working on your simpleton *friends*, I'm sure I am. But won't your family be ever so concerned about your spending time with me in private? Who knows what might happen."

Ginny felt sick to her stomach. "Nothing's going to happen. We can just... talk, if you like."

"I don't *like*, Weasley. *You* asked *me* for this favor. Don't forget that." Draco gestured to the bar with his empty glass. It disappeared and another materialized in its place, full of something so powerful that Ginny could smell it, even through the fish. "So." He knocked back half the drink in one gulp. "What exactly is your deal then?"

Ginny hardly knew what to tell him. She wanted him to open up a bit, but she could hardly tell him that. From across the table she felt his energy flow toward her, a bit bigger than usual—perhaps it was the alcohol. Perhaps it would be easier if he got drunk. She allowed it to soak into her, and hoped it would build up her tolerance. He knew things. There was something distinctly secretive in his energy—a current colder than the others—and it blocked her from fully absorbing his aura. There were so many things he must have known. Things about the Grangers. Things about the Death Eaters. Perhaps working on Draco would be more beneficial to everyone than she had originally realized. She had to loosen him up. She had to act casual.

"How long have you had that dragon, anyway?" she asked.

Draco jumped, and Ginny could feel that he was more guarded now than he had been all day. "Why? What about him?"

Ginny was surprised by his reaction. It was obvious to her, and probably to everyone, that Draco had a serious affinity for dragons, and that his own was of great importance to him. He might have been a bastard in all other ways, but he cared about his pet. "It was just a question," she said.

Draco scowled. "I've had him long enough. Don't make small talk with me, Weasley, I'm not here to socialize—and get your hands down. What are you going to do?"

Ginny sighed. "Well, I don't know how much you know about Healing, but—"

"Plenty."

"All right. Well, it's different with everyone."

"And better with some than others, I'm sure."

The lewd suggestion in his tone rankled Ginny. She was used to being teased, but not like that, and Draco found the most personal ways to taunt her about Harry. "Some people," she retorted, "are harder to work on, because they're damaged—and you're one of the worst I've seen."

Draco bristled. "*Damaged*?" His voice dropped. "You presume a great deal, Weasley."

"I don't presume anything. I feel all of it."

Draco pounded the second half of his second drink and beckoned for another. When it appeared, he wrapped both his pale hands around it so tightly that Ginny wondered if the glass would break.

"Go on, then." He glared at her. "Tell me what I should be *feeling*."

Ginny hesitated. "I don't think you want to know what I can feel."

"Don't *tell* me what I do or do not want."

"I just..." But it was useless. Ginny knew it was useless, he was so defensive that even two potent shots hadn't done much to open him up. "I think it would be better if *you* talked," she attempted.

"Really?" he drawled. "And just what do you want me to talk about?"

"Whatever comes to mind."

Draco raised a white eyebrow. "Let me see, what comes to mind... Perhaps you'd like me to talk about seeing my father murdered? Oh. Wait." He lifted his glass in a mocking half-salute. "*Your* father did that, didn't he?" He pounded the drink and smacked the empty glass onto the table.

Ginny didn't mean to cry out, but his anguish hit her like a wall. And what he'd said was terrible; she never thought about it if she didn't have to. He was getting the better of her, and she hadn't done any work at all. Concentrating as hard as she could, she bowed her head slightly, turned up her hands on her knees, and tried to stay open.

"But you didn't want to hear about *that*, I'm sure," Draco said softly. "Just thought you might try a little *experiment*." Ginny didn't see him order another drink, but she heard the soft '*pop*' of materialization, and heard the glass scrape against the wooden table as he picked it up. "You think because you're the *Minister's* daughter you can do whatever you'd like... but you can't. You're nothing. Your whole family, all of you, thinking you can rise above your station."

Ginny hardly heard the insulting words. There was real pain beneath the anger, and it was louder, in all her senses, than anything he could say. She could tell that he was coming unhinged. She dared a look up and saw that his face was unusually red from drink and emotion. And though he was ranting and bitter, his expression was more open than she had ever dreamed it could be.

"He isn't the Minister," Draco went on, clutching his drink in both hands. "He's nothing. He's a murderer usurping the position of his betters."

"Do you hate us?" Ginny asked. She could feel the hatred pulsating between them. She knew it was there, and she wanted him to name it.

Draco laughed horribly. "Hate you? *Hate you?* What do you *think*, Weasley, you idiot?" He leaned forward across the table, narrowing his eyes at her. "Do *you* hate *me*? Do tell me, little *Ginny*."

He spoke her name like something poisonous, and Ginny tensed, thrown off course. She sat back and stared at him as he polished off his fourth drink. Did she hate him? She thought of the way Draco had treated her family. Harry. She thought of how cruel he was to Hermione, and she thought of the Grangers, lying tortured in their hospital room—though his father had done that. She thought of Tom Riddle—though that had been his father's fault, too. Nothing Draco had done to them seemed as horrible, as painful, as what he radiated right now. She felt his father's death consume him all over again, and it didn't matter that Lucius Malfoy had been a Death Eater, or that he had tried to kill them. Draco's grief was acute.

"I can't hate you," she said. And it was the truth.

He made a noise of disgust. "And why *can't* you? Do you even know what it means? Do you even know what it means to really hate someone? Do you know what it does? Or are you just too *weak* to understand..." His voice tailed off, and he was clearly beyond his own control. His eyes were glassy and Ginny could feel the tears behind them—he had reached his emotional threshold and was about to cry. He seemed to know it, too; he gazed away at the wall, shaking.

"I can't hate you, because we fought in the same war." Ginny paused. "I don't know much about your side of it, but it couldn't have been any nicer than mine."

"Nicer?" he mumbled, and looked up. His eyes swam. "*Nicer?*" he repeated viciously.

Ginny didn't look away. "And yes, if you really want to know. I know about hating someone."

He snorted wetly. It was a vulnerable, inelegant sound, and it shocked Ginny. "I doubt that," he said, but his usual cutting tone was dull and sad.

It had never struck her, not even while sitting near him day after day, that this level of emotion existed in Draco Malfoy. He was human. More than anyone knew. And he hated himself for it. It was the saddest thing that Ginny had ever felt or seen, and she reached out her hand on instinct, to help him, but came up against his aura instead. It was as dark and twisted as ever, but so open that it flooded into Ginny, making her shudder. The light in the room seemed to flash, and the feelings

that washed over her were nightmarish. He was lost. He had never lived up to certain expectations, and now it was too late. He despised his present self, and he despised his past, and he despised the world for being less than he had expected. He hated his father. He missed his father. He had never known his father. He resented his mother, who could not help him. He had never made any choices of his own and he felt paralyzed to do so now—his world had been shattered and his way of life was beyond his reach, and the one person who could have built it up again was dead. This game against Harry was all he had left. These were the last shreds of his control. He had the dragons. He had the dragons.

Ginny sat with her hand outstretched, stunned by the nuances that she could now interpret. She had never been this good before. She was getting sharp. Really sharp. She shut her eyes and tried to discern what was happening with the dragons. What was his connection to the dragons...?

"Is this what you do for Potter? Sit dutifully at his side and let him unload his poor, troubled little soul?"

Ginny gasped and dropped her hand. Draco's energy had shifted, suddenly and totally, leaving her in the cold. She kept her eyes shut, unwilling to look at his face.

"Does he tell you all about how *hard* it was for him?" He paused. "I'm sure he does. And what do you do to comfort him?" His voice was full of scorn. "What do you do to make him feel *better*?"

Shaken by the personal interrogation, Ginny opened her eyes, and she saw something in Draco's wet gaze that unsettled her deeply. He was drunk. And he was not himself. But he wanted her to make him feel better, even if he did not know how to ask.

"Are you finished?" she asked faintly.

"Finished?" He pulled back, smiling cruelly. "Hardly, Weasley. It's never finished. Haven't you learned that by now?" Apparently lost in the bitterness of his own world, Draco Malfoy dropped his gaze into his empty glass.

"Well *I'm* finished." Ginny pushed her chair back. "I'm too tired to keep going today."

Draco smirked into his glass, which was suddenly full again. But his smirk was not the same as it had always been. It had lost its easy arrogance, and looked quite painful. "Too much for you, of course." He glanced up at her, eyes full of contempt. "I should have known."

"I said it would be a challenge." Ginny tried to get her bearings, to remember why she was here. It had all been more than she'd anticipated, and she knew that she had only scratched the surface. There was more work to do, here. And for reasons that weren't entirely logical, she wanted another chance. But she could not imagine that he would ever submit to this again—it would take the most subtle maneuvering to get him to agree. "I could... try again. If you'd do me that favor." The last words were hard to say, but she knew it was the only chance she had. He required flattery. It was how he operated.

For a minute, he actually seemed to consider it, and then—"I have a *life*, Weasley," he sneered. But he was lying. He had nothing, and Ginny knew it. "You'll have to find someone else to be at your beck and call."

She nodded. She hadn't expected automatic agreement. "Well. I'll be back tomorrow in any case, to work with the dragons. So if you change your mind..."

Draco shot her a venomous look, then turned away and drank. But this time, he held his glass as if he were holding a crystal goblet, and his posture suggested that he was somewhere altogether finer than this dark little pub. He was poised and silent, and Ginny knew that he had shut her out. For now.

Without another word she rose from the table, put on her cloak, and left the Leaping Fish.

A/N: A special thanks from Arabella to Jedi Boadicea, who deserves a co-writing credit for the final segment of this chapter. Jedi is responsible for the bulk of Draco's behavior there, not to mention his dialogue. Also, it is Jedi B on whom I blame my fascination with Mr. Malfoy, the younger. Jedi B is the Queen of all Evil. Bow down, or she'll have you cursed.

Thanks to the crazy Leesburg ghosthunter for taking us on that tour of residual hantings and for explaining to us why our electronic equipment malfunctions so often (we are "high EMs").

And thanks, as always, to the mighty beta team: B Bennett, Cap'n Kathy, Firelox, Joe and Moey

— CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR —

Breakthroughs

Zsuzsa Zabini was guilty, Ron decided, after reading through her ninth file. The files were stuffed with eyewitness accounts; there was an official record of the most recent spells performed by Zabini's wand, many of which had been Unforgivable Curses, and there was plenty of written correspondence between Zabini and Malfoy... Zabini and Pettigrew... Zabini and Rookwood... Most of the letters had been sent from Moscow, where Mrs. Zabini had served as Ambassador to the Russian Ministry. And unless someone had been controlling her quill from there, Zsuzsa Zabini was going to spend a very long time in Culparrat. Ron almost felt sorry for her, seeing as her son was dead and she must've had a very hard year. Almost. But not quite.

"Ron, take a look at this." Sirius raced into the room and nearly threw the *Daily Prophet* onto Ron's desk. "Another Dementor—it escaped Azkaban yesterday and made it to shore before anyone saw it—"

"Oh, right." Ron glanced up at Sirius. "Harry told me last night."

"What about Arthur—does your dad know about it now?"

"Probably."

"Does everyone in the Ministry know about this but me?" Sirius demanded.

Ron felt a bit uncomfortable. "I don't think it was a big deal."

"Not a big *deal*?"

"It just got to shore, they turned it around, it's not like it hurt anyone—"

"And when it comes to problems at Azkaban, no one wants to keep me informed." Sirius's face was dark. "That's it, is it?"

Ron looked down at his files. "I've found some great stuff on Zabini," he began, but it was no good.

"Of everyone you know, Ron, I have the *most* right to know what's happening with the Dementors."

Ron really didn't want to look up, but he did, right into Sirius's very angry eyes. "I know."

"I want to *hear* about things like this. Harry should have come to *me*."

"Tell Harry that, then."

"I will." Sirius left the paper on Ron's desk and strode out of the room.

Ron blew out a breath. His mum had always told him that he was volatile, but he had a feeling that Sirius had him beat in that department, and he didn't envy Harry, who was riding one dragon and was about to face another one. He picked up the paper and looked at the picture on the front, of a dragon keeper driving a Patronus toward a dark, hooded figure.

Oblivious P.A.P. Allows Dementor to Escape

"That's bollocks!" he said aloud, but, as Flummery had written the article and Peltier had taken the photograph, Ron wasn't surprised. Quickly, he skimmed the rest of the page.

At 3pm yesterday, an unrestrained Dementor terrorized the shoreline, not ten minutes' broom flight from Stornoway (where Kitty Douglas, late wife and mother, lost her soul to another rogue Dementor, last July). It is believed that the Dementor escaped from Azkaban while Lisa Sergenev, Harry Potter, and Mick O'Mullet were on patrol. Mr. O'Mullet, who serves as Associate Director of the Permanent Azkaban Patrol (P.A.P.) was unavailable for comment.

"He was probably out doing his bloody job!" Ron shouted at the paper.

The dragon riding team who were in the air at the time of the escape seemed unaware that a Dementor had gone soul hunting on shore until they were informed by a dragon keeper. No alert had reached the Ministry. When the Daily Prophet requested any new Azkaban-related news at 3:15pm, the uninformed Minister declared: "There is no new information to report."

This second escape begs two questions: how responsible is a Minister who is unaware of a potentially fatal breach of security in a major Ministry department? How effective is a Minister who creates a faulty P.A.P.?

"Well, perhaps if you weren't such a stupid waste of life, you'd remember that there *was* no P.A.P., when the first one escaped!" Ron yelled. "Not one problem in months, but all you'll print is this irresponsible rubbish—"

He couldn't read any more. He crumpled the front page in his fist and threw it against the wall.

"It's not as bad as it might have been," came a soft voice from the door. "Flummery's done far worse. I kept waiting for her to say something much nastier, but I suppose the *Prophet* is keeping a closer eye on her now."

Ron looked up, relieved to see Hermione there, watching him with her hands behind her back. "That article's crap!" he said. "She might've been worse before, but her insinuations are bad enough—and how does she know all that stuff? What is she doing? Hiding in the bushes? How's she getting into the dragon camp, and how is she always on the spot for these articles? Who's tipping her off? I'll tell you who—it's Malfoy." Ron brought his fist down on his desk. "He did it in school and he's doing it now. He's probably got them on salary, the dirty great—"

"Ron." Hermione came to his desk, tilted her head and looked at him. "You didn't eat any breakfast."

"I was late getting up, wasn't I?"

"Yes." She pulled a little white paper bag from behind her back and set it on his desk. "Brain food," she said, and leaned across the desk to kiss him. "Don't let Flummery put you off your work," she murmured, tapping his files. "You're better than she is. Forget her. Forget Malfoy. Concentrate on what's important." She tried to pull away. "No, I've got to go, Penny's expecting me in ten minutes—"

But Ron put his hands on either side of her face and kept her there for a good, long kiss that took the anger right out of him. "You're the best," he said, when he finally let her straighten up. "Thanks, Hermione."

"No problem. Oh—and I'm going to get lunch at the Lighthouse at one, with Penelope and *Fleur*," she said, raising an eyebrow. "If you want to meet us."

Ron snorted casually and hoped that his ears weren't red. "Nah. Why not invite Bill? He's upstairs with Dad, sitting in on some meeting."

"No, he's not starting work with us for a couple of weeks. We're hoping to have the charm ready for testing by the twenty-fourth, but I have a feeling *Fleur*'s going to try and get it finished earlier than that." Hermione giggled a bit, then sobered. "But it's a completely professional environment, of course. Extremely serious."

"Don't I know it." Ron grinned and reached out his hand, and Hermione squeezed it.

"See you at dinner," she said.

"See you." Ron watched her as she left the office, throwing a smile over her shoulder at him as she went, and he felt like the luckiest man on earth. She was brilliant. She was even letting him take her to the Cannons match, on Valentine's Day. He dug into the little paper bag she'd left and munched happily on a bacon sandwich, and decided that he wouldn't let Flummery put him off his work. Nothing that stupid reporter could say would come between him and putting Zabini where she belonged. He opened the tenth file, and found yet another letter she had written to Lucius Malfoy. Ron was grateful that the Russian Ministry had been nosy enough about the mail to file away copies of all correspondence without their employees' knowledge. If only the employees hadn't been so suspiciously curt in their writing, he thought, disappointed at a glance by the length of the letter.

7 Jun 98

M,

It is finished. My son knows what to do. Inform yours that things are in place. I believe you still mean for him to arrange for our entry. The date remains the same. Tell him eleven o'clock.

Z

Ron dropped his sandwich and his heart pounded painfully in his throat. Malfoy. Draco Malfoy. Responsible for something. Right here in black and white. With shaking hands, Ron picked up the letter and read it again. And again. And by the twentieth read, he knew exactly what it meant.

The final battle had begun on the thirtieth of June, at the leaving feast. They'd been listening to McGonagall give a farewell speech in the Great Hall when it had started.

And Malfoy hadn't been in the Hall.

Ron remembered it with perfect accuracy. It hadn't bothered him to see Malfoy's usual seat empty. He had assumed—they all had—that Malfoy's absence was meant to insult McGonagall and the rest of them. He had not been there when half the students had stood and turned on the rest of them. Most of the Slytherins had stood, along with several of the Ravenclaws, a good number of the Hufflepuffs, a few of the teachers and even, to Ron's horror, a handful of Gryffindors. All had leveled their wands at the unsuspecting students, trapping them. Blaise Zabini had been there, leading his Slytherin classmates—Zabini would have been convicted straight away if he hadn't been crushed when the ceiling had begun to fall.

But Malfoy... Ron realized it now. He supposed he should have realized it before, but it had all happened so fast, and the fight had been so brutal, that he had never questioned, after that moment, just what had happened to Draco Malfoy.

He had gone to the gates and tricked the wards down. He had let his father onto Hogwarts grounds. Along with all the Death Eaters.

And Voldemort.

Ron realized that he was hyperventilating, but he didn't care. If it was all true, if he was right, then he was going to put Malfoy in prison forever. *Forever*. He couldn't *wait*.

Still trembling, he rifled haphazardly through the rest of Zabini's tenth file, but there was nothing. He proceeded to the eleventh and final stack of papers, praying that there would be something else, something even more condemning, among these wonderful, *wonderful* letters. And even when there was nothing else to read, Ron remained undaunted. Malfoy Manor, he realized slowly, had never been properly searched. Fudge had forbidden a seizure of the Malfoy possessions, and after Lucius's death, it had no longer seemed a priority.

But Ron knew where the Malfoys' hidden trap door was. And the current Minister was bound to let him open it.

"Find something good?"

Sirius was back. "Good?" Ron said, a little hysterically. "*Good?* Malfoy's a *criminal*. Look at this letter." He shoved it into Sirius's hands and explained its significance.

"Yes... you may be on to something," Sirius said. He handed the letter back, looking distracted.

"I'll tell you what I'm on to. I'm going to put him away and he's going to pay for every sick thing he's ever done to Hermione, and to Harry, and to Ginny, and to me—no *wonder* he dropped those charges against me, last autumn. He didn't want us doing any more digging. Oh, but he's in for it now—"

But Sirius seemed unmoved. "Something has to be done," he muttered. "And soon. This can't happen again—it could have killed someone. It could have worse than killed someone..."

Ron realized that Sirius was lost in his own thoughts. It was always a while before Sirius's attention came back to law—once he had started thinking about the Dementors, he was usually a lost cause. But Ron had never felt he had the right to interfere in Sirius's tirades where the Dementors were concerned. It seemed criminal to ask him to concentrate on anything else, and so Ron had spent a lot of time listening to furious, frightening rants that seemed to come out of the blue. Sirius often stopped in the middle of work to brainstorm possible means of Dementor destruction. At this point, Ron knew more about what the Azkaban guards had done to Sirius than he was comfortable knowing, but he had never interrupted. This was the first time he'd ever wanted to.

"...can't be impossible," Sirius was saying now. "Has to be a way."

Ron nodded. But deep down, he wondered if there really *was* a way to kill the Dementors, just like he wondered if there was a way to wake Hermione's parents. Some things just seemed indestructible. Like curse-comas, and creatures that had never really been alive to begin with.

"I'm going to go out there and try something else as soon as I get my mind around something feasible—have to give it a shot, can't sit around forever while they get into villages and try to kill people. And Harry can't ride that dragon for too much longer, I just spoke with him, and he's not himself at all. He's ill. He looks old. It's got to stop."

Ron nodded again, more vigorously. "That's the truth," he said, thinking of both Harry's situation and Ginny's. "The dragon riding's *got* to stop."

"Yes." Looking vaguely determined, Sirius paced across the office. He sat at his own desk and opened up a file before turning back to Ron. "Did you say you had found something interesting, before?" he said. "Sorry, I didn't hear—"

Ron couldn't help a laugh. "Yeah, I found something interesting," he said, glad that Sirius had returned to the present, to share his victory. "I found something brilliant." He waved his wand, and sent Zsuzsa Zabini's letter flying to Sirius's desk. "Zabini to Malfoy. Have a look at *that*."

* * * * *

Dear Hermione,

It was no trouble at all to write a recommendation letter for you, and I will happily write another if you should ever need one.

I am happy for your success with the Imprisonment Enchantment; and yes, it is your success. The absorption and distillation of external input is part of a Thinker's natural process. Your ability to hear the good in Ron's suggestion, and to apply it to your spell work, is a direct result of the time and effort you spent here. Do not frustrate yourself trying to divide the credit. From what you have told me of Ron, I am sure that he is happy to have influenced you in such a useful way. Breathe deeply, and allow yourself to enjoy your successes. It is not conceit to accept that you have accomplished something great. Remember, though, that there are pitfalls and obstacles to overcome in the construction of any new spell. You will surely come across these, as you and your associates work to build the Imprisonment Enchantment. Do not fool yourself into believing that the idea is faulty; the spell map you sent to me is evidence of an idea beautifully conceived. Be patient in its execution, and you will succeed yet again.

I sense another deep frustration in your letter; forgive me for naming it. I know that your parents' condition preys upon your heart, and I know that you came here to find relief for them in your own gifts. This may yet come to pass. I Think on them often, and though I have yet to make any progress of my own, I will continue to keep them in my daily thoughts. That is all we can do, Hermione. You have not failed them. You put such heavy pressure on yourself, and you must stop. Let go. Love them, but allow yourself to be free of your feelings of responsibility for their condition. I know that I am asking you to do something far more difficult than Thinking, but it is imperative that you try.

It is nothing short of amazing that your friend is a Healer, and I agree that you may be of great help to each other in waking your parents. Remember that Healing, too, is an intuitive process and that any pressure she feels will hinder her progress as well; therefore, let her work peacefully. If there is indeed a residual curse in her way then perhaps you might begin there. I understand that mediwizards have no magic capable of wiping out such shadows; it is one thing to heal active physical pain, but healing the ghost of physical pain is quite another concept. Let us both Think patiently on that, for now.

I am always glad to hear from you. Please write again, and keep me up to date on your life and work. If you should ever require a retreat, remember: you are always welcome here.

*Your friend,
Delia*

Hermione had kept the letter in her pocket for a week. The pale blue stationery seemed like a breath of ocean air, and Delia's words had calmed her very much. After Ginny had told her that her parents were still suffering from the Cruciatus Curse—even if it was merely a shadow—Hermione had begun having nightmares. She had only been to St. Mungo's once, and it had been a fruitless visit. The mediwizards were helpless to repeal a residual. They could not detect the remaining curse with even the most modern magic, and the Head of Cursology had demanded to know how Hermione knew it was there in the first place. Hermione had introduced him to Ginny.

Ginny had decided, in the interest of her safety, not to tell many people about her gift, but she had consented to demonstrate her abilities for the directors of St. Mungo's. It had been a wise decision. Hermione was proud that a career now awaited Ginny at such a prestigious hospital—if Ginny wanted it. She was also relieved that the hospital directors had given Ginny an identification badge and twenty-four hour access to the Grangers' room—not that access was going to do her much good. Until Hermione could think of a way to unblock her parents, Ginny couldn't even get near them.

At least the Imprisonment Enchantment was coming along, and Hermione gave it her full attention, knowing that she'd go mad otherwise. It was an excellent distraction—it even gave her a feeling of accomplishment. Each day, Fleur built a slightly bigger model of the spell on Penny's living room

table, and each day, a new prisoner beetle was sacrificed. After practicing construction for nearly three weeks, Fleur could build invisible prison walls from floor to ceiling, and it was no longer safe to practice in Penny's flat. The spell was very, very powerful, and none of them was keen on getting splinched.

"We'll have to take it outside," Hermione said, one Friday afternoon. "Where should we go?"

"The Burrow," Penny said at once. "We can work in the Quidditch glen without any Muggle attention, and I can leave Leo with Molly." She grinned. "How's that for selfish?"

Hermione glanced at Fleur, and worked hard to keep the smile out of her voice. "I'll ask Bill to meet us there on Monday morning, shall I?"

Fleur nodded, but did a bad job of sounding casual when she asked for directions. And on Monday morning at nine, the three women found themselves in the glen beyond the Burrow, staring down at a fully-grown Blast-Ended Skrewt.

"I 'ate zoze things," Fleur complained, her accent coming back in full force as she pulled her wand and took several steps backward. "Why do we 'av to use it?"

Hermione shrugged. "It's bigger than a beetle, and it's not exactly cruelty to animals if it gets splinched. There are a few more penned up on the edge of the woods there, in case we can't put this one back together. I got them from Meg Castellwild—you know, Penny, the gamekeeper who stepped in for Hagrid? She was happy to give them up, too. She said she usually liked Hagrid's strange beasts, but that he must've been drunk when he came up with these ones."

Fleur snorted. "Zat would explain it, oui—keep it back, 'Ermione!"

"Hello there, ladies."

Fleur froze, wand out, and turned her head toward the voice.

"Hi, Bill," Hermione said.

He looked like he always did—dragonhide boots, the vest that made him seem like some sort of wizard pirate, and the ponytail. Hermione wasn't certain that she had ever seen his shirt quite so crisp, however, or his ponytail quite so well combed. His smile wasn't as relaxed as usual, either. "Hi. Thanks for the owl—those spell maps are amazing, I've never seen anything like them. You two did a fantastic job."

Hermione beamed. "Thanks. Let me introduce Fleur Delacour—or do you know each other from Gringotts?" She looked from one to the other of them, and neither seemed to know what to say.

"We know each other," Bill finally said. "How've you been, Miss Delacour?" He put out his hand.

Fleur took it. "I 'av been well, thank you, Mr. Weasley. And you?"

"Great, thanks." They stood looking at each other for a minute too long, and then everyone, including Hermione, jumped.

Fleur had just screamed bloody murder and leapt back.

"What happened?" Bill demanded, looking startled.

"It—it touched me!" Fleur pointed to the skrewt; it stood only feet away, its stinger end pointed at her.

Bill began to laugh. "It's ugly, all right. What the hell is that thing?"

"It's just a Blast-Ended Skrewt." Hermione giggled. "Hagrid made them."

"Get it away from me," Fleur said, still sounding panicked. "S'il te plait, zoze things were in ze maze and I 'ate zem—"

You ate them? It was as if Ron was living in her head. Hermione could not help a grin, but she pointed her wand and Banished the skrewt to the center of the field. She had grown to like Fleur a lot more than she'd thought she could, but there was still something satisfying about seeing her lose her cool. "There," she said. "That ought to be far enough. Go on and Imprison it, Fleur—it deserves to splinch itself."

Looking shaken and annoyed, Fleur stalked away from Bill, who still seemed amused. She advanced on the skrewt and drew her wand.

"*Captio Semscindor!*" she shouted, and the air in front of her shimmered. She moved to the right. "*Captio Semscindor!*" She walked in a careful circle around the skrewt, taking care not to touch the spell she was building, putting it up in wall-sized sections until the skrewt was her hostage. "*Captio Semscindor!*" she finished, and tossed her hair over her shoulder. "There!" she called across the field. "Ow long did that take?"

"About eight minutes," Penny called back, then spoke in a normal voice. "Is that about the size of a cell, do you think?"

Hermione shook her head. "The cells at Culparrat are twice as big as the space she just Imprisoned, aren't they? We'll have to do some exact measurements, of course, but let's say it requires about fifteen minutes per cell..." Hermione did quick calculations in her head. "She's going to be

working every day for a month.”

“Only if you make her work alone,” Bill said. “You can’t possibly expect her to charm a whole prison by herself. The Ministry will have to hire assistants for her.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow. He was awfully protective.

“That’s true,” Penny said. “But there’s no point in hiring anyone until we’re ready to build it at Culparrat. First, let’s make sure the spell is as solid as it can be. We may have to adjust the layers a bit. We need to know if it can be broken.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Bill pulled his wand and jogged out to Fleur, who held up her hands to stop him. Hermione had to strain to hear her speak.

“No, don’t come closer, Bill—it begins right there.” She pointed to empty space, looking very worried.

“It’s all right, Fleur. I know how to reveal spells.”

So they were on a first name basis. Hermione grinned to herself. She had already decided not to tell Penny what she suspected, because it didn’t seem appropriate to gossip about other people’s relationships at work, but she wished there were someone here to share the joke. She would have to tell Ron about it later.

“Hermione?” Penny was sitting on the ground, frowning at one of the layer maps. “If Bill can break that charm, I think we should start to adjust the spell here. This is... well, not a weak spot, exactly, but I’m not sure it’s the best possible support mechanism.”

Hermione dropped to her knees and studied the map until they heard a loud cry from the center of the field.

“MERDE!”

They looked up to see Fleur with her hands on her hips, looking extremely frustrated. The skrewt was scurrying off in the other direction. Bill must have broken the spell, and it hadn’t taken him too long to do it.

“It’s all right, Fleur!” Hermione shouted. “We’re going to try and improve it a bit—come and have a look at this map—”

“Non, I will try this again,” Fleur shouted back. She pulled her hair away from her face and secured it, looking determined. “Perhaps it is not the spell, perhaps my work was weak.” She pointed her wand at the skrewt and brought it flying back into the center of her space. “*Captio Semscindor!*”

When Fleur’s second attempt didn’t work, she and Bill stayed out in the center of the field to keep trying. Hermione could no longer hear much of their conversation, but they seemed to be working well together, and at one point, when the skrewt had scurried off again and Fleur was looking furious, Bill reached up a hand and pushed a bit of loose hair behind her ear. “I’m sorry,” Hermione heard him say. Fleur jumped. “I’m really, really sorry.” Hermione wasn’t sure what he was sorry about, but it seemed to make sense to Fleur, who nodded and walked away to catch the skrewt.

Hermione stopped watching. She began to rethink the magical paths of the layer in front of her, not minding at all that there was more work to do. Delia needn’t have warned her to stay patient throughout the pitfalls, Hermione thought, tracing her wand over one area of the map and rearranging the lines. She needed the pitfalls to engage her mind and keep her from dwelling on other things.

Hermione was so engrossed in rearranging the structure of the weak layer that she was shocked when Bill said it was time for lunch. Had it really been hours? Hermione glanced up at the bright, overcast sky, then stood and followed the rest of them into the Burrow.

“Adam, my lad!” Bill said, and gave him a clip round the ear. “What’s going on?”

“Molly says I can ask my friends to come and stay, if I like.” Adam beamed. “She worked it out with the Ministry and the Children’s Home, and I’m allowed to go down Knockturn Alley with Diggory and tell them about it. If they don’t come on their own, they’re going to get dragged here, like I was. They’ll get their hair charmed and everything. They’ll probably hate me for a while, but I don’t really care. And I told Molly that there’s five of us, but she says that’s a fine number.”

Hermione had never heard Adam—whom she was still not used to calling Adam—sound so honestly happy. She was amazed that he’d recovered so well from the shocking news of his parents. Everyone always said that children were resilient, and she supposed that Harry had been, but it was still very surprising. Perhaps Adam hadn’t had time to get over the shock.

“That’s great news,” Bill said, clapping Adam on the back. “When will all this happen, then?”

“Next month.” Mrs. Weasley came in with Leo on her hip, balancing a tray of sandwiches in the air. Bill put the sandwiches on the table and fell into the armchair, and Molly handed Leo to

his mother. "I need time to prepare the house, and to make sure you're all willing to give up your rooms. I'm sure Ron will want to claim all his old posters, at the very least. I almost hate to pack up your things." Molly sighed. She pulled a bottle out of her apron pocket for Leo, and tugged fondly on Bill's ponytail. "I haven't moved a single badge in your room, dear."

"Mum..." Bill glanced at Fleur, who had settled on the sofa beside Hermione. "I'm twenty-nine."

"And you're my baby." Molly bussed his head, and held out her hand to Fleur. "Have we met? I seem to remember—"

Fleur looked pink and shy as she shook Mrs. Weasley's hand. "Fleur Delacour. I was at 'Ogwarts during the Triwizard Tournament. It is very nice to meet you, Mrs. Weasley."

"It's very nice to meet you too, dear. Let's get started then, shall we, Adam?" Mrs. Weasley headed for the stairs, and Adam followed her. "All of you are welcome to stay for dinner," she called, as they disappeared.

"E is not your brother?" Fleur asked, when it was just the four of them.

"No, Mum's sort of adopted him. He was living in a cellar down Knockturn Alley and Ron brought him over here."

Fleur kept her eyes on her sandwich. "And she is bringing other children here, as well?"

"Looks like it."

"What a wonderful woman."

Bill flushed. "Well she's only happy when there's a crowd, really." But he looked proud.

Hermione caught Penny's eye, and Penelope raised an eyebrow. "We all love Mrs. Weasley," Penelope said. She gave Hermione a knowing half-smile. "What does your mum do, Fleur?" She put Leo's bottle in his mouth, and he put his fat hands on either side of it and shut his eyes.

"She was a fashion model," Fleur said proudly. "But she does not work now. She volunteers in many places. What about your mother?"

"She's a school secretary," said Penelope. "But I don't see much of her—I'm Muggle-born, I'm not sure if you knew that."

Fleur shook her head and looked at Hermione. "And your mother?"

Hermione supposed she should have seen it coming. She saw Penelope and Bill glance at her, and knew she had to answer. She couldn't sit here and pity herself. They had all lost people. Even Fleur. "She's a dentist. Was a dentist." She never knew which tense to use.

Fleur's face fell. "Oh, no. I am sorry." She was quiet for a moment. "In the war?"

Hermione nodded, then shook her head. "But she's not dead, she's—she and my dad are in St. Mungo's. They're not conscious anymore." The Burrow had never felt so cold. "They were attacked." It sounded so melodramatic. She had tried to think of shorter, less brutal ways to explain it. But there weren't any.

Fleur touched Hermione's hand, and Hermione worried, for a minute, that she was going to cry. She had been so careful not to think of her parents. She had tried so hard to let it go. Or perhaps she had only been avoiding it—she hadn't braved the hospital in two weeks. Hermione felt suddenly guilty and tired. "I'm so sorry," she managed. "I want to work, but would anyone mind if I went home for today? I'll make it up tomorrow."

They all encouraged her to go home and lie down, and Hermione felt worse. They had lost just as much as she had, and she was the only one being a baby about it. Feeling sad wasn't a good enough reason to shirk responsibilities. If it were, then Harry should never have taken on a single responsibility in his whole life. But she knew that her concentration was ruined, and that she would be no help to any of them for the rest of the afternoon.

"Forgive me for asking," Fleur said, as Hermione grabbed her cloak.

"Oh, Fleur, it's not your fault." Hermione wrapped herself up in her cloak. "See you all tomorrow."

She Disapparated, but she didn't go home. She didn't want to lie down, she didn't want to Think; she just wanted her mother and father. She Apparated on the steps of St. Mungo's and identified herself to the front desk, then hurried through the corridors and past the kind wards, worried that if she would burst into tears in public if she didn't get into her parents' room soon. When she smacked into someone in the hall, she didn't even stop to apologize.

"Hermione? Hermione, hi!"

She stopped and tried to focus. "Neville," she said. "H-hi. S-sorry about that."

He looked at her face, and shook his head. "It's all right," he said. "You go on, I'll talk to you later."

But it was too late. Hermione lost her composure right there, and buried her face in her hands. She was glad when Neville put an arm around her shoulders and asked her to remind him which

room number it was. He steered her into her parents' room and stood quietly beside her, keeping his arm around her.

"I c-can't get used to it," she sobbed. She tried to control herself, but it was no good.

Neville patted her shoulder. "You don't get used to it," he said. "You just..." He shrugged. "I don't know. Never mind. I'm sure it's different for everyone."

Hermione looked at him through swimming eyes. "But h-how do you f-feel?" she asked. "What's it l-like after so l-long?"

Neville glanced at her, and shrugged. "It's strange. I... still think they're going to snap out of it. But then again, I know they're not."

Hermione sniffled. "Do you think you've accepted th-that?"

"Yes." Neville smiled a little. "Oh, there's a voice that tells me not to give up hope, and I haven't. But I know I don't have any control over what happens."

Hermione's shoulders heaved. "I'm s-supposed to have some control. I went to C-Cortona--"

"I heard about that!" Neville squeezed her shoulders. "You're so clever, Hermione. It must've been brilliant."

"S-sort of. Not r-really." She wiped her face with both hands. Neville dug a handkerchief out of his pocket and she took it. "Thanks. I wanted to Think up a spell to h-heal them." She gestured to her parents with the ruined handkerchief. "But I couldn't. And D-Delia said I have to let go before I can Think properly, but I c-can't d-do it..." Hermione lost herself again, and covered her eyes with the handkerchief.

"Of course you can't." Neville laughed through his nose. "Let go? Of your parents? I'd like to see anyone try."

"But you s-said you accepted--"

"That's different."

"H-how?"

Neville frowned. "Dunno. I suppose... I stopped waiting for it. I used to wait, when I was younger. I'd come here and sit for hours, and just wait. I used to think they'd get their minds back and help me with my schoolwork, and *then* I'd get better at school. Things like that. I used to put things on hold. And I used to fantasize all the time about the things we'd do together. Spent hours and hours. Wasted loads of time. Used to daydream about it in class every day--and you saw how great I was at school."

"But you don't do that now?"

"No. I dream about it sometimes." He gave Hermione a smile. "But that's different, isn't it?"

Hermione had never been so glad to know Neville Longbottom. She had always liked him very much, but now she felt that she could ask him anything.

"When did that change? What happened?"

Neville tilted up his chin, as if considering. "You know when I think it was? There was this one day, in fifth year--and you can't tell anyone this."

"Neville, honestly."

"Right. I came to visit them and they were walking around, oblivious to me, and... Actually, have you met my parents?"

"No."

"They're in a really different state from yours. It might help if you have a better idea--I'll take you, if you want. It's just down the hall."

Knowing that she was being granted the deepest kind of trust, Hermione let Neville take her hand, and she went with him to his parents' hospital room. It was big, and open, and his parents were wide awake at a small table, playing a game of cards.

"Hello, Mum," Neville said. "This is Hermione Granger. We went to Hogwarts together."

Mrs. Longbottom looked up at him. "Oh. Of course, Hogwarts." she said. "Nice to meet you. He's told us so much about you."

"It's lovely to meet you, Mrs. Longbottom," Hermione said. "Neville has told me about you as well."

"Silly!" Mrs. Longbottom let out a polite laugh. "Neville can barely talk yet. He's only a baby!"

"He *should* be talking," Mr. Longbottom said, throwing some cards on the table. "He's over a year old. Mum says that *I* was talking at six months."

Neville snorted, and Hermione was amazed. Was he really laughing? Had he made his peace with this? They were awake, and yet they didn't know him. It was worse--much worse--than what she was dealing with.

"They can only remember up to the time they were hit with the curse," Neville whispered. "They don't know who I am, but lately I've been hearing lovely stories about how developmentally challenged I was as a baby."

"Do you work here, young man?" his father demanded.

"No. My name's Neville."

"My son's name is Neville. Let me tell you something, Neville." Mr. Longbottom looked up from his game of cards. "Never play clubs when hearts are on the table!" And as if he'd just made perfect sense of a perfectly good joke, Mr. Longbottom went into strange, inhuman shrieks of laughter. His wife joined him, and soon they were howling like a pair of hyenas. Hermione felt a terrible chill.

"You see," Neville said, "sometimes they acknowledge me. They never *know* me, but they'll ask who I am—this is a good day, really. They're not wandering around or anything. I was just in here a minute ago, and they were friendly then, too. Sometimes I'll stand here all day, and they won't even notice there's another person in the room. Sometimes they hate each other, or one will think the other is some sort of burglar, or they both think that *I* am, and you should see the fights."

"Neville...I don't know what..."

"It's all right, Hermione, I just wanted you to see what I was talking about." He squeezed her hand and took her into the corridor again. "Bye, Mum and Dad," he called, and shut the door behind him. They walked slowly back toward the Grangers' room. "So I was here one day, and it was one of the days that they didn't acknowledge me at all. It was just after Dumbledore died, and Dumbledore had been a real friend to me." Neville blinked hard. "He gave me an open invitation to his office on my first day at school, and I took him up on it several times. He really loved my parents. I used to go and talk to him when I needed to chat about... anything. Everything. He never made me feel funny about any of it. When he died, I just about lost it. I came here for help, and I needed Mum and Dad to snap out of it. I needed them more than I ever had. And I shouted at them to come back—I really *lost* it. I went completely mad, for about an hour. And then I cried for... I don't know how long."

Hermione leaned her head on Neville's shoulder, thinking how brave he really was. None of them had known about any of that. He had never said a word.

"Because no matter what I did, no matter how loud I was, no matter if I slapped them—and I did—they were gone. Just gone." Neville was quiet for a minute. He opened the door to the Grangers' room and brought Hermione to stand between her mum and dad's beds. "That's when I realized that they weren't coming back. I cried harder than I've ever cried in my whole life. And the next day... and I'm not saying it was overnight, I was building up to that for a long time... but the next day, it was like something had been lifted. And it's never come back."

Hermione put her free hand on her mother's. "Perhaps I should shout," she said.

Neville squeezed her hand again, and then he let it go. "Then I'll leave you to it," he said. "Pop by Hogwarts any time, Hermione. You've... you've got an open invitation to my office, all right?" He laughed a little.

Hermione looked up at him and held out his handkerchief.

"Keep it," he said, and softly shut the door behind him.

"That was Neville, Mum," Hermione said quietly. Tears filled her eyes again, and her first instinct was to hold them back, but she wondered if that was part of the problem. So instead she let them come; they blurred her vision and tumbled down her face. "Neville Longbottom. His parents are down the hall. I went to school with him, and he's just the n-nicest..." She bowed her head. "He was the second person ever to ask me on a date. He invited me to the Yule Ball, I don't know if I ever told you that. I turned him down. I was already going out with a famous Quidditch player. I *know* I told you that. I remember how mad Dad got about Viktor's age." Hermione laughed and sobbed at the same time.

"Viktor got married, you know. He's got a baby and everything. I wish I could show you the pictures he sent, they're so sweet." She touched her mother's face. "I love you so much, Mum—" she said, and began to cry openly. "The weirdest-things-bother me. There was a-song you used to sing-about a train-and I can only remember half the-words." She smoothed her mother's hair out of her face over and over again. "What if I have-a baby someday and I can't-remember the words? You have to-wake up and remind me." She bent down and kissed her mother's cheek—she wrapped her arms around her mother's neck and stopped talking. There was no more space in her breath for words. She knew that her face was all wet and disgusting but it didn't matter right now.

"Wake up," she finally managed. "Please, Mum, please. Please." Hermione straightened and took her mother by the shoulders. She had never let herself do this before, but she couldn't stop herself now. "I know you can hear me." She shook her. "I *know* you can hear me, you can't just be lying there, your *eyes* are open, damn it, you're not trying hard enough—wake *up*—" She shook harder.

She shook until she knew it would have been painful if her mother had been awake, and when Mrs. Granger still gave no response, Hermione let out a half-scream of anger and whirled around to her father's bed.

"Dad, come on. Come on." She touched his face. It was smooth; the spell she'd cast had done a perfect job of keeping him clean-shaven. Hermione didn't want to see him with a beard and be reminded of how much time had passed, but it suddenly infuriated her that she had cast such a useless spell. What was the point of pretending? Why was she cutting their hair and cleaning their stupid teeth? They weren't coming back. They couldn't hear her, they didn't know her, and they weren't coming back, not ever. They would lie here and waste away and miss her wedding, and her career, and her life. They would never know what she became. They would never be proud of her again. They would never hug her, or laugh at her, or tell her not to worry so much, or ask her to turn her light on so that she wouldn't ruin her eyes while she read, or poke her between the shoulder blades and tell her to stand up straight. They were gone. Just gone.

Hermione doubled over and sobbed into her father's shoulder. She crawled into his bed beside him, unseeing, not caring who came in and saw her like this, and she wept into the front of his hospital gown as if she were a very little girl. She cried without limiting herself. She cried without shame. She cried until her eyes were sore and her voice was gone, and she didn't stop until her body decided that it was time. She didn't know how long she had been there. It hardly mattered. She only knew that it was dark outside the window and that the lamps had come on automatically. Or perhaps a nurse had come in and lit them. Hermione had paid no attention. Perhaps she would sleep here tonight. Perhaps it was all right to stay. Ron would worry, but she couldn't bring herself to get up just now. She hadn't felt so quiet and empty and peaceful in a long, long time. She wrapped an arm around her father's chest and sniffled into his shoulder.

"I wish you could have a good cry," she murmured, and kissed his cheek. His eyes were wide open and frightened. They had been like that for years. They would be like that forever. "At least then you could have a good night's sleep." She stroked the lifeless skin just under his eyebrows, and passed her fingers over his forehead, wishing she could smooth away the terrified lines. "Couldn't you, Dad?" She didn't know what she was talking about. She was babbling. "You could cry and cry, and let go of this residual and all those horrible memories. You could rest. You could get out all the fear and you could empty out all the curses, and you'd be so calm and quiet, and your eyes would close, and you could sleep..."

She trailed off, so far gone that she almost didn't hear what she was saying.

Almost.

"You could... Dad... you'd really feel better, wouldn't you? If you had a good cry?" Hermione propped herself up on her elbow and looked down into her father's terrified face. "Dad?" she whispered. "What if... what if I could find a way to give you that? What if I could..." She passed a hand over his unblinking eyes, hearing her heartbeat thud in her ears. "Because there's a weeping hex, isn't there? *Lacrimosum*. I remember learning it..." She sat up and slid off the bed, her mind whirring along with her heart. "A hex won't do it, but that's the basic idea, if I could make you weep, if I could give you a sort of... release, then perhaps you could let go of the residual... at least you could shut your eyes..."

"Tears are a gift. Tears unblock, they cleanse and create space. Dry your eyes child, and sit up again when you are ready."

Hermione stood between the beds, Delia's voice in her mind. She looked from her father to her mother and she knew that she was right. She knew it deep in her bones. She didn't have to ask Ron. She didn't have to ask Delia. This was the path she had been meant to find—this was the spell that would clear a space for Ginny. And even if there was nothing that Ginny could do, Hermione would have the relief of knowing that her parents were no longer in their state of frozen pain.

"I love you both so much," she whispered, feeling alive all over. "But I have to go home and start working. Right now."

* * * * *

Harry lay on his back on the sofa with a pile of jelly slugs on his stomach. He tossed another one into the air, caught it in his mouth, and washed it down with Butterbeer. It was hard to drink the Butterbeer while lying on his back, but Harry managed not to choke.

He should have been cleaning the Notch. It was a revolting mess. When he had lived with the Dursleys Harry had always been extremely clean, and out of respect for Remus and Sirius he'd kept his things tidy at Lupin Lodge. But now that he had a space of his own, and could do what he liked, it gave him a sort of rush to leave his things lying around. He still half-expected that Aunt Petunia would appear and shout at him to clean it up, and it was always a surprise when Ron didn't say

anything. It had been several days since either of them had lifted a finger to clean the living room or kitchen—though Harry had noticed with some amusement that Ron's room, at least, was always spotless.

Short of tidying up, he supposed it would have been a good idea to eat an actual meal, take a shower and go to bed; he was, after all, hungry, dirty and tired. But just now there was something relaxing about drinking Butterbeer and catching jelly slugs in his mouth, and he wasn't in the mood to do anything clever. He'd turned down a trip to the pub with Ron, knowing that it was going to involve intense legal discussions, and he hadn't bothered asking Ginny to come over. She'd been perpetually busy since Valentine's Day, with schoolwork and Healing and Malfoy.

Harry flung a jelly slug at the wall and watched it slide down to the carpet.

"Harry?"

He sat up straight, and the jelly slugs went everywhere.

"Can I come in?"

Harry was thrilled to hear Ginny's voice—thrilled and horrified—why had she chosen to come over tonight? The house was disgusting, he hadn't washed, and what did she want, anyway?

"Yes—wait, just a minute—"

There was nothing he could do about the way he smelled, but he quickly banished five days' worth of plates into the kitchen sink and picked the jelly slugs off the sofa and floor. He piled them on the table.

"Coming—"

He turned down the lamps a bit and lit a fire instead—the darker the room was, the better it would look—then adjusted his glasses, pushed a hand through his hair and ran to open the door.

Ginny stood there with her schoolbag, looking rather nervous. Clearly she had bothered to shower; her hair was still damp. "Sorry, are you busy?"

Harry realized he was blocking the door. "No, that's all right." He let her in and shut the door behind her. "I just wasn't expecting—sorry about the house."

"I don't care about that." Ginny put her bag on the sofa and sat beside it. "I just have to study, and Hermione's trying to Think, so I thought I'd come over here. Do you mind if I stay?"

Harry shook his head.

"Mind if we have music?"

Harry flicked on the wireless, which was tuned to the sports channel. He left it there long enough to hear that the Falcons were beating the Harpies, then switched it to music.

"That's all right, you can keep the Quidditch on—"

He shrugged and hovered at the end of the couch, unsure whether he should sit next to her. Sometimes after working, she complained that she was too open to be near him. It didn't seem to stop her from being near other people, but Harry tried to put that out of his head. It was good that she was here. He didn't want to talk about the rest of it. "I don't want to listen to the Falcons win another game. I still can't believe they beat the Cannons."

"Yeah, I know, it's a shame," Ginny agreed, taking a stack of books out of her bag. Her eyes strayed to the front of Harry's shirt and she snickered. "What did you *do*?"

Harry looked down and realized that the jelly slugs had left a large and colorful mark on the front of his white T-shirt. "I—well." He tried to get the slugs off the table before Ginny could see them and make the connection, but she was already laughing again.

"Oh, were you eating a nice, healthy dinner off yourself?"

He smiled a little. "No."

"Seriously, is that all you've eaten?"

Ginny looked at him with real concern for the first time in a while, and Harry heard Malfoy's voice in his head as clearly as if he were on dragon back. *If only your girlfriend had time to take better care of you...*

"I wasn't hungry, all right?" he said stiffly, and went towards his room, not sure why he was suddenly so annoyed. "I need a shower."

Ginny looked confused. "I can go," she said, putting a hand on her books. "I know you have things to do, I can study at home."

"No, no," Harry said quickly. He didn't want her to go. He just wanted to be clean, and to sit near her, and to stop thinking about Malfoy. He should have been able to stop—he *knew* how ridiculous it was—but the idea hung over him like a black cloud and he couldn't shake it. "I'll be right back—stay and study as long as you want." He heard Ginny sigh behind him as he went into his room, and he wondered if she'd still be there when he came back.

It was strange to get into the shower, knowing that she was out there. Harry brought all his

things into the toilet and undressed there. He didn't want to walk down the hall in a towel, though the idea of her seeing him like that made him rather warm. She had, once. By accident, on his birthday. And then she'd given him that book—he still read through it every so often—with the pages and pages of memories from everyone else, and just a few words from her. *I am here*, she'd said. At the time, it had seemed an enormous statement, but lately Harry had found himself wishing that she had been a little less vague. It would have been nice to have something to point to, to reassure himself.

He shook his head and turned on the water. He was being stupid. After all they'd been through together he didn't need to ask her for explanations. He wouldn't do it. He didn't know what was the matter with him.

Perhaps it was left over from the Dementors.

He took a short shower, keeping the water as hot as he could stand it, and he felt much better when he got out. Like something had been burnt off. He threw on clean jeans and a T-shirt and went back into the living room without bothering to dry his hair, a heavy feeling in his stomach. Perhaps she'd gone home.

It was such a relief to see her still sitting on his sofa that Harry stood in the doorway for a moment and looked at her. She had clipped her hair back, but she'd missed a big piece and it fell over her shoulder, making her look messy and distracted in a way that Harry liked. She frowned into the massive book that lay open in her lap, keeping her fingers on the page of another open book that sat next to her.

"To successfully divine with runes using the Caslutra Method, the history of Caslutra's reign must be fully understood by the diviner," Ginny read. She shifted her eyes to the other book. "The Caslutra Dynasty—a hundred years of terror in wizarding Egypt. Oh, like I want to read about *that*." She hefted the book into her lap, on top of the other one. "Come on, Harry, sit with me," she said, without looking up. It always gave Harry a shock when she knew he was there without actually looking at him. "You can tell me what you remember about all this."

"I'll never be able to sneak up on you, will I?"

She glanced up, looking a bit guilty. "I didn't mean to invade, I could just feel you there. I can try not to do that." She shrugged and looked down.

Harry opened his mouth to protest—he hadn't meant it that way. He'd been joking. But nothing he said to Ginny lately seemed to work out, and he had a feeling that if he tried to correct it, he'd just dig himself deeper. So he changed the subject.

"Want anything to drink?"

"That's all right." She kept her eyes on her book. "Just let me know if you need to go to bed, and I'll go home."

Why did she keep talking about going? Did she *want* to go? Why had everything been so difficult lately? Harry couldn't read her at all, and he wished he could remember something about Ancient Runes so that he'd at least be able to help her study. But seventh year had been a blur. He still wasn't quite sure how he'd passed any of his classes, and he had a feeling that someone had seen his name on his N.E.W.T.s and been afraid to give him bad marks.

Worried that it wasn't the best thing to do, Harry ventured over to the sofa and sat gingerly beside Ginny's schoolbag. "I don't know how much I can help you with this," he said honestly. "But I can hold one of those books, or something." He felt the stupidity of the offer as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

Ginny, however, didn't seem to think it was stupid. She smiled a bit, pushed the schoolbag to the floor, and unloaded one of her books onto Harry's lap. She moved closer to him in order to see both books at the same time, and the loose lock of her hair brushed against his arm. It was amazing that something so little could give him such a wonderful chill. It was good to feel her at his side. Harry held his breath and slipped his arm around her waist. He waited for her to say that she couldn't handle the contact.

Instead her body relaxed. Her head fell softly onto his shoulder.

"You're okay?" he asked.

"For a little while, I should be."

Harry let out his breath, and rested his cheek on her hair. He tapped the book in his lap. "Is this homework, or are you just studying for the N.E.W.T.s?"

"It's for an essay. But it's not due until next week." Ginny's hand sneaked between his back and the sofa, and her fingers curled round his waist. "Let's not read," she said quietly. She turned up her face and kissed his jaw.

Harry breathed in through his nose and shut his eyes.

"You smell nice." Ginny kissed him again and moved her fingers on his waist. Her other hand came up to his face, and she slid her fingers into his wet hair and sighed.

Harry leaned into her hand, grateful for the sensation and very glad that he had showered. It had been weeks since they'd sat close together like this. Weeks since she'd kissed him. He'd hardly touched her at the Cannons' match. It had felt strange to be on a double date in front of his friends, and he had had no idea of how to behave on such a romantically charged holiday—and he had felt pressured to perform, somehow, as he had watched Ron with Hermione. Ron was so relaxed about all of it, and Hermione knew him so well that nothing between them was ever forced or tense. They had been friends for such a long time that their relationship seemed to Harry to be easy.

Nothing about Ginny was easy. Being with her made life better, but positioning himself next to her was a challenge every single time. He always felt self-conscious. *She* seemed comfortable, and he envied her for it; he tried to stop thinking about it and just let go, but so far he hadn't been able to. Never entirely. And finding things to say to her, especially lately, was almost impossible. He'd been incapable of saying anything good since she'd started working with the dragons, and silence now seemed the safest policy.

A nagging voice in his head told him that his real problem had nothing to do with Ginny. It was *his* fault, whatever it was. But he didn't know how that could be possible—he'd been doing everything he knew how to do, and he still wasn't getting it right.

He breathed in the scent of her-like shampoo and wood smoke, tonight. The smell of the fire had got into her hair. She was tracing the tip of her nose against his cheek, sending little shocks down his neck, letting him know that she wanted to be kissed. *This* was the only easy part—when talking was unnecessary and he could tell exactly what he was supposed to do. When the air was charged like this, when the silence felt heavy and he felt drugged, when he could feel every breath she took against his skin and when her chest rose and fell, brushing his arm...

He turned his head and slid his mouth into place, and a deep, satisfied sound came from both of them. Harry felt Ginny's face go hot; she slid her hand across his chest and rested it in the center of his T-shirt.

Unthinkingly, he mirrored her touch with his hand on her body.

Ginny took a sharp, choked breath against his mouth. "H... Harry..."

He wasn't sure what he was thinking. But it felt good, *she* felt good, and he silently begged her not to stop him now, not to tell him she couldn't stand it, not to cry out in sudden pain and jerk away from him.

She clenched her fingers on his T-shirt and pressed towards him.

It was all the invitation Harry needed. For a long time he held his breath, keeping his eyes closed, keeping his mouth on hers. But they weren't kissing now. She breathed jerkily against his lips, holding tight to his waist, making no protests. It was all so simple. There was no doubt here, no wondering how she felt for him or whether they trusted each other enough. Ginny was his, and she cared for him, and somehow he had already known what she would feel like and how she would move. Had he done this before—known her before? He'd never heard her sound like this, and yet the noises were familiar. The fantastic, frustrating, pounding tension in his body was familiar, too, and it drove out everything that had been threatening his peace of mind. He forgot that he had hardly spoken to Ginny in the past two weeks, and that just a few minutes ago he had felt awkward and unsure. Hands were better than words. He had the feeling again—he'd had it before, with her—that he was flying. That he had found something he knew how to do without stopping to think. It was the thinking that ruined it. The thinking and the talking.

"We have to talk," she gasped.

Harry froze, his hand still on her, and opened his eyes. Ginny had pulled her face back slightly and she was breathing hard. He felt every breath rise and fall against his palm. She had to be joking. Talk-*now*?

"I need to know what's going on," she said, still sounding out of breath.

Was he supposed to move his hand *off* her for this conversation? Harry gave her a pleading look.

But Ginny wasn't finished. "Everything's been strange lately, and I can't just... we can't just..." She looked frustrated. "I'm sorry, I don't really want to think about it either, but we have to."

It required great strength of will, but Harry dropped his hand into his lap and sat back. "Think about... what?"

She gave him a look that suggested he was being rather stupid. "About us," she said. "About the way we've both been acting. Don't you think it's been strange?"

Harry shrugged.

"You don't think so?"

He shrugged again. "I don't know. We're fine tonight, aren't we?"

"Yes... but haven't things been a bit strained?" Ginny tilted her head and gave him a shrewd look. Her cheeks were still very pink beneath her freckles. "I've hardly had a word out of you for a month."

Harry wanted to remind her that it had hardly been a month; he'd taken her to the game for Valentine's Day not two weeks ago. But he only pressed his mouth shut and shrugged.

"And now suddenly everything's fine? It isn't, and I can't just—" Ginny lowered her eyes and turned pinker. "We need to sort things out first. Or I won't feel right."

So it was an ultimatum. He had to talk or nothing else would happen. Harry knew things had been strained between them—she was right about that—but what good did she think talking would do? Was talking going to stop her from riding Malfoy's broom? Harry wanted to ask, but he had a feeling that if he brought that up it would backfire on him. "I don't know what there is to sort out," he said, trying to keep his voice neutral. He withdrew his arm from around her waist.

"Well." She pulled her arm back too and kept her eyes on her lap. "I know my situation at work isn't the best. I know it's bothering you."

Harry instinctively leaned back.

"Not because I can *feel* it bothering you, Harry," she said, looking up at him. "There's no need to try and get away from me, I'm not going to feel things anymore without your permission."

"Oh." Harry stayed back. "I didn't know if you could help it."

"Well I've had lots of practice lately." She shrugged. "I can't *always* help it—not with you. But I'm fine right now, and I can hold off pretty much everyone else all the time."

Even Malfoy? Harry wanted to ask. He'd read, in one of her books, about how Healers could be as attracted to their enemies as they were to their friends. It was something about the draw of deep energy, regardless of whether the energy was positive or negative. And she'd said before that it was difficult to keep Malfoy's feelings away from her. Harry didn't like the way it all sounded. It sounded too much like the way she dealt with *him*.

"What are you thinking?"

He jumped. "Nothing."

"Harry..." Ginny sounded disappointed. "Just tell me."

He occupied himself pulling a stray thread out of the back of the sofa cushion. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Why not?"

He glanced at her, then went back to pulling the thread. "I just don't."

"But I'm trying to talk to you. I *want* to talk to you."

He was well aware of that. "Well I'm sort of tired," he said.

She watched him for a minute. "So that's it?"

"It?"

"You're not going to say anything else?" Ginny crossed her arms over her chest and looked very uncomfortable.

"I don't know what to say, Ginny." It was true. He had tried, several times, to tell her how much it bothered him that she worked so closely with Malfoy, but she never listened to his side of it. She always came back with explanations, and he ended up feeling like he was wrong for being bothered. But he didn't know how to stop being bothered. There really wasn't much else to say.

And he couldn't say it. Not truthfully. Harry knew, very dimly, that the real problem went much deeper than his irritation with her working relationships. Ginny stirred something else to life in him, something much darker and more uncomfortable, something he had always kept at bay. But it was easier not to think too hard about the things that swirled in him, deep beneath the surface. Easier to blame it all on Malfoy. Easier, safer, and much more familiar.

Except that meant blaming it on Ginny, too.

"All right." Ginny didn't sound angry, but she leaned down and picked up her schoolbag. She reached over Harry's lap and grabbed her book on Egyptian history, and stuffed it in with her other things.

"Are you going?" Harry wished she wouldn't. He wished there didn't have to be a talk. Everything had been perfect, for a few minutes.

"I'm sort of tired myself," she said, and stood. "I'll see you tomorrow, all right?"

Harry nodded. He had a bad feeling that if he didn't try to say something right now—to stop her from leaving—then it was going to be a while before he had another chance.

But the door shut behind her before he could think of a single word.

* * * * *

Hermione had started to Think. She'd spent an hour and a half researching in her room, which she'd cleared of most of the clutter when she'd returned from Cortona, and then Ginny had been nice enough to turn off her music and leave the house when she'd seen Hermione settle down to meditate. But Hermione had very quickly reached a stopping point in her meditation. She needed another book.

Scanning the shelves, she reached for one that would help her take her mind off things, and curled up with it on Remus' big chair.

"Nothing like a quiet evening with *Advanced Concept and Theory of Modern Arithmancy*," Remus said. Hermione looked up, dazed. She hadn't heard him come in, but he was standing in front of her now, holding a book in his own hand.

"Oh!" Hermione said. "Do you want your chair?"

He laughed. "No, please, stay where you are. I'm fine on the sofa."

"Okay," Hermione said, but she felt a little guilty. This was Remus' house, and they'd all invaded it in the summer. No one could have foreseen that she and Ginny would still be here as late as February. She knew that Molly would have gladly let her stay at the Burrow, but there was something calming about Lupin Lodge, and Hermione knew that it was a much better Thinking environment. She felt her face grow warm when she thought that Molly might not turn as blind an eye as Remus did to her irregular comings and goings and her breakfast returns from the Notch.

"Remus?"

"Mmmm?" He kept his eyes on the slim paperback in his hands.

"I just... it's really nice of you to let me stay here. It's not annoying to have me around, is it?"

Remus looked up from his book. "Hermione," he said. "Don't be ridiculous. I love having you and Ginny here and the boys down the street. Sirius and I both feel like we're reliving a bit of our youth, although I'm not sure that he ever outgrew his."

Hermione laughed, feeling better. Remus didn't look old to her. When he was relaxed and smiling, he looked quite young, despite the graying hair and the lines around his eyes.

"Actually," Remus shifted in his seat to face her. "You look a bit tired this evening. Have you been to see your parents?"

"Yes." Hermione shut her book and took a breath. "I've been to see them and I... had a sort of revelation."

Remus raised his eyebrows.

"I think I can get rid of the residual."

Remus's chin went down and he looked up at her with narrow eyes. "A revelation indeed." He put his book aside. "How do you think it can be done?"

"I think—well, it's never been done before." Hermione could feel herself growing impatient with excitement. Perhaps it would help to talk it out. Perhaps it was the right way to approach this. Meditation had been almost impossible and she had to sort through the idea in order to solidify her concept.

"Just tell me."

Hermione did. She told him about meeting Neville, and about trying to speak to her own parents. She told him, very briefly, about crying beside her father and about the words that Delia had said to her months ago, on Cortona.

"And it just clicked. I knew immediately what I had to do," Hermione said, hoping that she was making sense. "I've never felt this way about a spell—not one of my very own. I've felt it before about Ron's ideas, and those have always been *right*. I just *knew* this was right. I know there's no precedent, I know there's no theory—I don't care. I *know*." Hermione leaned forward in a passion, with her book in her hands and her elbows on her knees. "So I came home, locked myself in my room, and started Thinking about the spell. You see, they've got the memory of the curse locked up inside of them, and it's—it's like a dam. There has to be a way to *break* it. It's like..." She stopped, trying to find the words to explain what she'd thought in her head earlier, but she couldn't do it. For once, she was operating on pure instinct, and there were no definitions.

"A balloon?" Remus prompted. "Letting the air out of a balloon?"

"Yes, a bit. What I saw... when I was meditating...it's difficult to explain how I came to a conclusion, actually. But there's a positive element to this. It's not just about taking out—it's about giving, or, feeding. Nourishment. When you let the air out of a balloon, the balloon isn't any happier for it. The balloon actually wants the air. My parents need the tears."

"So it's essentially a form of medication?"

"You could call it that." Suddenly, Hermione was a little bit confused. What *had* she thought

earlier? She closed her eyes for a second and tried to recreate the images and feelings in her head. Remus was silent.

Without warning, Hermione could see the spell, alive in her head as if she'd already drawn it. Opening her eyes, and tapping on her Arithmancy book, she said, "I know how to map it now. The words—the words." She thought a moment. Naming spells was one of the fun parts. "*Lacrimus Salacium*. The Weeping Relief Spell. Not very poetic, I'm afraid—but meaningful to me."

Remus nodded. "Can you show it to me?" he asked. "Map it for me?"

Hermione hoped that she could. She pulled out her wand and pointed it into thin air. "*Experiri Lacrimus Salacium!*"

Points of light connected with each other in the air. Knots of red, representing pain, swirled around in glaring red streaks. They twisted and turned and joined together until they were concentrated into one, enormous knot. The light surrounded the red, golden in color, not unlike the Gryffindor colors, and grew brighter, and more powerful. Slowly, something began to escape from the circle—tears—enormous, bright blue teardrops that looked ready to burst, nearly opaque in their fullness.

The tears continued to grow, until they could no longer contain themselves, and exploded, sending smaller droplets of water showering over the ball of red and seeming to melt it. The knot dimmed, and flickered, and separated in the air until it was no more.

Hermione took a deep breath and looked over at Remus, who looked impressed.

"How did you come up with that?" he asked. "Can you just see it, and then make it happen?"

"Sort of," Hermione said, feeling a rush of pride. "It's never happened this fast before. But I still have to look things up, of course. I'm not an expert at Arithmancy, and I spent an hour researching how to make one path turn on another so that I could make the tears turn back on the pain."

"An hour?" Remus shook his head. "You really came up with all of this tonight?"

Hermione beamed. "Well, I've become much better at working without books since I've trained with Delia."

"I can see that," Remus said, smiling. "It looks very powerful, that spell."

"It's small—but yes, it's very focused. In theory, very powerful." Hermione bit her lip. "I think I need to test it before I cast it on my parents. And then perhaps Ginny can try again, and see if she can get any closer to them—actually it might help to have her there when I cast this one as well." Hermione knew she was talking too fast, but she couldn't stop. "Because she might be able to sense things happening to them, you know, see if the spell's really working—I need to find her. Do you know where she is?"

"Not upstairs preparing for her N.E.W.T.s, I can assure you that." Remus' tone was not light.

"I'm so sorry, Remus," Hermione felt guilty again. "I shouldn't have asked her to help with my parents, should I?"

He sighed. "It's not that. She's doing too much everywhere. She's making herself ill and she's going to have to learn to pick her battles. In many ways, Ginny—" He stopped.

"What?" Hermione asked.

"She's... young. What I mean is, she is full of very strong ideals and noble principles, and she doesn't have a realistic concept of what is actually possible. It's good to be idealistic—but there needs to be balance. Surely you learned the importance of balance at Cortona? But Ginny will learn. I just don't want her to kill herself before she works this out."

"Do you want me to talk to her?"

"No. I don't think so." Remus stood and smoothed his robes. "But I think that it's very important to remember to have fun. Care for a drink at the Snout's Fair? A stroll might help you clear your head. And it doesn't seem that Sirius is going to be home at any human hour."

Hermione agreed. A drink sounded lovely—a Butterbeer. She'd learned to steer clear of anything more potent. She felt as if she had come into her own, walking down the street with Remus and discussing magical theory. She had always admired him as a teacher, and now he spoke to her as an equal.

"I don't want you to get your hopes up, Hermione. I think this weeping spell you've conceived is an excellent idea, but your parents are very ill. Even if it works, there will still be obstacles—possibly insurmountable obstacles. But what you've told me about the Longbottoms is encouraging—I didn't realize that they were so advanced."

"You think it's advanced that they can only remember things that happened seventeen years ago?"

"They're *awake*, Hermione. The Longbottoms were my friends—I went to visit them several times in the beginning, and they weren't as immobile as your parents, but they were incoherent. They

babbled and ranted and raved and knew nothing about themselves or their surroundings. So we know that the effects of the Cruciatus Curse *can* wear off given time. I think that your spell may speed up the *waking* process. But you'll need Ginny to help restore their minds. There is actual, physical damage to them, you know that."

"Yes." From anyone else, such harsh truths might have brought tears to her eyes or cause unsettled feelings in her stomach. But from Remus, it all seemed rational.

"Here we are," he said, swinging open the heavy wooden door to the Snout's Fair. "And here are Ron and Sirius," he added, nodding to a booth in the corner. "Hard at work."

Ron and Sirius looked quite settled in. There was a half-finished bottle of Goldie's Liquid Curse on the table between them. Sirius was leaning forward, an intense look on his face, speaking and gesturing with manic energy. Ron was twirling his glass on the table, looking a bit bored.

Hermione and Remus ordered Butterbeers and joined them.

"...how to kill something that was never alive," Sirius was saying. "Maybe there's a way to *dissolve* them. Turn them into smoke." He puffed on the brightly-colored tube between his fingers, and blew out a cloud of spiced smoke. "They're solid creatures. If they exist, then they can be destroyed."

Remus gave Hermione a look, and then slid into the booth, pushing Sirius closer to the wall. "You know those things have terrible side effects," he said, pointing to the sqworm.

"You're joking." Sirius took another puff. "I never knew that. Was that discovered while I was in prison?"

Hermione slid in next to Ron, not sure what shocked her more—the sight of Sirius smoking, or the fact that he'd so coolly mentioned Azkaban. He and Ron must have been closer than she realized. Or else he was very drunk.

"I'm glad you're here," Ron whispered, and kissed her on the cheek. "He won't drop it. I can't get him to change the bloody subject."

Hermione patted Ron on the knee and took a sip of her Butterbeer.

"Tell Sirius and Ron what you've worked out, Hermione," Remus instructed, his voice firm. "I'm sure they'll find it interesting." There was a warning tone in his voice, and Hermione was surprised to see Sirius paying attention to her.

"It's about my parents," she began.

"Really?" Ron asked, tucking a leg under him and turning to face her. "Did something happen? Are they doing better?"

"No, no... nothing like that." She forgot for a moment that Remus and Sirius were listening as well. "I went to St. Mungo's today, and I saw Neville, and I saw his parents."

"And?"

"And he gave me an idea. So I went to see my parents, and ended up having a nervous breakdown."

Ron grabbed her hand. "What happened? You *do* look tired," he said. "And your hair's more insane than usual."

"Thanks," Hermione answered, reaching back and plaiting her hair. "How's that?"

"I like it the other way," Ron answered. He pulled at a piece of hair that she'd missed. "Put it back."

Hermione smiled at him. She wanted to give him a kiss, but Sirius snickered, reminding her that they were not alone.

"Remus, I love it when you wear your hair like that," he said, mocking Ron. "And those robes bring out the dirt under your fingernails."

"Shut up," Ron and Remus said in unison.

"Right, sorry," Hermione said. She finished telling them about her day.

When she had finished telling them about the spell, and when Remus had backed her up by describing the look of it in the air, Ron leaned back and whistled. "My, my. Did it take you two whole hours to work that out?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes. Was he being a prat on purpose? "Two hours is *not* a long time, Ron. Delia told me that it's taken her *years* to discover some solutions. I realize this isn't a *huge* spell, but it's a huge deal to me, and I thought—"

"You're the worst Thinker ever," Ron interrupted. His eyes were twinkling.

"Oh," Hermione laughed. "Sorry. I guess I *am* tired. I didn't see that one coming."

"Hold on. That's *brilliant*," Sirius leaned across the table and pushed the bottle of Liquid Curse out of the way. Ron poured himself and Sirius another shot.

"Well, I thought it was a good idea," said Hermione, feeling pleased. "I just hope it will help my parents."

"So your theory is to suck the fear out of your parents with this spell?" Sirius's eyes had the very hollow look that they'd had in the Shrieking Shack all those years ago. Hermione really could understand why some people still crossed the street when they saw Sirius coming. She wondered if he'd had that look before Azkaban, and suspected that he'd always been a bit mad. "You're saying that the tears turn back on the pain—so are they a force of attack, or do they act as a drain, to draw out all the unpleasantness?"

Hermione nodded. "Both. The spell feeds the energy *behind* tears straight *into* the pain, in order to dissolve it, and then the pain can be released, through actual tears, which are the end product of the spell."

"You came up with that," Ron said under his breath, "and it already sounds like something out of a textbook. Next year it'll be on the O.W.L.s and everyone'll be forced to memorize it. You're cursing generations of students forever—"

Hermione elbowed him.

Sirius's eyes turned bright. "The Dementors feed on human happiness," he said. "Perhaps that spell could be manipulated to work on them."

"Sirius," Remus said, moving the glass of Liquid Curse farther away from his friend. "Perhaps we should discuss this at home, and leave Ron and Hermione to enjoy this news in peace. She conceived the spell for a very specific purpose that has nothing to do with—"

But Sirius wasn't listening. "They *suck* the happiness out of you. And then they take your soul. All those people, all those people in St. Mungo's wandering around that Post-Dementor Soul-Sucking ward. They have *no souls*."

"That is unfortunate, Sirius, but I don't think—"

"*Unfortunate?*" Sirius seemed to have forgotten that Ron and Hermione were still at the booth.

"I've *never* seen him this mad before," Ron whispered to her. "I don't think he'll notice if we make a run for it."

Hermione put a finger to her lips, wanting to listen in case she could help. She'd studied with Delia to become a Thinker and, even if it had been for fairly selfish reasons, she wanted to be able to help others as well. Sirius was right; the Dementors were a problem and no one else seemed to be worrying about them. She could remember the Hogwarts grounds in their third year. She remembered the feeling that had washed over her as a hundred Dementors had rushed upon her, Harry, and Sirius. She hadn't been able to fight. The coldness, the despair, and the weakness that had filled her knees—the only thing that had felt worse had been seeing her parents for the first time, after the attack.

Sirius had felt like that every day for twelve years. And he'd had equally bad things to dwell on. Worse, in some ways, because the people he loved were dead and he'd been blamed for it.

"Sirius?" she ventured.

But he and Remus were now arguing. Or, rather, Sirius was ranting on about his idea, while Remus listened with his usual poise, wearing an expression that indicated that he was going to come back at any second with a rant of his own, if Sirius wasn't careful.

"Sirius?" Hermione said, more loudly this time. He looked over at her, mouth open, mid-sentence. "Tell me where you're going with that idea."

"Well," he said, looking surprised that someone was trying to converse with him. "You were saying that your new spell would drain the terror out of your parents. And I was just thinking that we could apply the same principles to draw all human energy out of the Dementors. Perhaps even to draw out those people's souls."

Hermione considered this for a minute. Everyone was watching her. What Sirius said made theoretical sense. But she didn't know enough about the Dementors to know whether or not the theory would translate to reality, and the idea of getting back people's souls seemed far-fetched indeed.

"I could research it," she offered. "But I wouldn't want you to get your hopes up. There are hundreds of Dementors. I suspect that you would have to get them all at once. They seem to be more of a ... unified body than individuals. I bet if you tried a destructive spell on one of them that the others around it would be able to sustain it."

"That's true," Remus chimed in, before Sirius could speak. "I can tell you right now that the Dementors can and do operate as a single body, when attacked. It's survival instinct of the lowest kind. They can feed off each other, in order to stave off everything but the most powerful Patronus."

"They don't care about each other. They're selfish creatures—look at the way they've escaped

individually."

"Yes, but if they *are* contained together and one Dementor sees another one wasting away, he will be able to rejuvenate him."

"Look, *I know*," Sirius's eyes were fierce. "That's a lecture I don't need, Professor, all right?"

Hermione shifted closer to Ron, feeling rather uncomfortable. Ron didn't seem too pleased to be present for the fight either; he shared a sidelong glance with her, and pulled the Liquid Curse out of Sirius's reach.

"Sirius..."

"No one has *ever* tried to kill Dementors before, Remus. And you *know* it's important to try."

"Yes of course. And you're right, no one has ever tried to kill them." Remus sounded as though his patience was wearing thin. "But they have been researched. People have tried to figure out ways to control them. I know that you're familiar with the attempts of Ebonard LaTarte in the nineteenth century."

"He only studied them so that he could learn how to communicate with them. That's why we've got the Dementors working as prison guards in the first place—that's why they could be used in Voldemort's bloody service, for God's sake. Good thing he got *his* soul sucked."

"Sirius! His intentions may not have been honorable, but his research was valid."

"Is it worth it to read up on this Ebonard person?" Hermione asked, wanting to stop the argument. Both men turned to look at her as if she was a surprising presence; they had obviously forgotten, as she had done earlier, that they were not alone. "Would it help me if I tried to Think on his research?"

"I thought you weren't supposed to use books while Thinking," Ron said lightly, giving her a playful punch. "I thought we were weaning you off of those."

"You should talk. You spend all day at your *job* at the library."

"It's the archives. And it's legal research."

"So?"

Ron laughed. "I don't know. Just ignore me and help Sirius so that he leaves me alone at work."

Sirius cracked a smile. "Never, Weasley." He looked at Hermione. "What should I do to help?"

"Well... any factual information you can give to me would help. Anything you might know that I couldn't learn in books."

"They're evil, soul-sucking, destructive creatures who feed on human emotion."

"Thank you so much for that groundbreaking data." Remus looked tired, and he stood up, motioning for Sirius to follow. "It's not going to happen overnight," he said. "Don't go doing anything foolish. Hermione has other obligations at the moment, and when those have been seen through, she's going to have to Think about what you're proposing. It could take weeks, or months, or years. And when she does come up with a solution—" Remus smiled encouragingly at Hermione — "I have no doubt that it will involve the work of many wizards and witches, a lot of powerful magic, and more work than *one* person alone can handle. Do you understand me?"

Sirius downed his glass of Liquid Curse before sliding out of the booth and stumbling to his feet. "Sometimes, Remus, I think you don't trust me."

As soon as they were out of earshot, Ron snorted. "I certainly don't trust him. Not when it comes to the Dementors. Did you see how unreasonable he got? It's like he can't see logic where they're concerned—and it's not like I blame him, but it worries me, because he doesn't seem sane about it. I don't think he's ever been completely sane, to tell you the truth."

"I was just thinking the same thing."

"Well, you know what they say about great minds." Ron kissed the side of her mouth. He smelled lightly of spirits, but he didn't seem tipsy in the least, and Hermione had the feeling that Sirius had been responsible for downing most of the bottle. "I wouldn't give him any information ahead of time, Hermione, or he might do something really stupid."

"Don't worry," she answered. "I'm the cleverest witch of my age." She turned towards him a bit so that he could kiss her more fully, but pulled away before they could start anything serious. People were at the booths and tables all around them.

Ron idly brushed her hair away from her shoulders and throat. "You're clever all right," he said, studying her eyes. "We hardly got to talk at all when you got here—but do you really think you've solved something, with your parents?"

"I know I have," Hermione said unhesitatingly. "It's not everything, but it's a very good start. It's going to give them relief, even if they never know it."

"They'll know it." Ron touched her mouth with the pad of his thumb. "They're lucky you're theirs, you know that?"

Hermione felt a stinging sensation behind her eyes, and she worried that her tears might get the better of her again. She ducked her head and leaned her forehead on Ron's shoulder.

Ron pulled her close. "Come here, you're tired. Want to go home?"

Hermione nodded, but she wasn't ready to move just yet. For once, in public, she shut her eyes and let Ron hold her for a very long time.

— CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE —

Outbursts

In her dream, the Great Hall was as resplendent as it had been at every Leaving Feast for the past six years. Banners hung proudly at the heads of long, shining tables and golden plates were piled high with fantastic foods. The teachers sat, straight-backed and smiling in their throne-like chairs, surveying the scene as if all was well.

Disenchanted, Hermione gazed down the Gryffindor table and across the hall.

There were so many empty chairs. At every table.

She had never thought the day would come when she would look forward to leaving this place, but the Hogwarts air was full of more fear than magic, and those who were fighting Voldemort could no longer risk being near certain students, whose aims were so obviously the opposite of what they should have been. And yet they had to sit with them today. Hermione wondered briefly if it was really wise to hold a Leaving Feast, this year.

Hermione's eyes strayed to the Slytherin table. Malfoy wasn't there. Perhaps he had decided that the Leaving Feast was beneath him and that he did not care to hear Headmistress McGonagall's commencement speech—she was giving it now in proud, even tones that rang out in the hall. Surely Malfoy would have spent the whole time sneering. Better that he should stay in the dungeon and sulk until he could go out into the world and truly become what Hermione knew he already was.

Not that Hermione could hear the speech either. McGonagall's words might have been inspirational, but Hermione could hardly concentrate; what she wanted more than anything was to turn and lean her forehead against Ron's shoulder and cry her heart out. This was the end. And tomorrow they would get on a train and go away, into a world where Voldemort and his Death Eaters had gained more ground than anyone had ever thought possible. Tomorrow they would leave their castle and their childhoods completely behind.

Tomorrow Harry would be gone.

Hermione slid her hand into Ron's, under the table, and he gripped it with all his might, though he didn't know what was coming. She wanted to tell him. She wished she could tell him. Playing dumb would be harder than anything she'd ever done. It would be excruciating to watch Ron grieve when he realized that Harry had disappeared and that he did not have any idea how to find him. But Hermione knew it was the best way. The only way. She was the best secret keeper she knew, and Harry knew it too. And if it would protect him—all of them—then she would let Ron agonize.

There was no room for a third party in a Fidelius Charm.

"If it isn't finished before we leave here, you realize we'll have to go into hiding," Hermione had said, only a week ago. She and Harry had been in the corridor late at night, walking up to the telescopes for a bit of extra study. Or so Hermione had told Harry. They had rounded the corner and come to the tower stairs.

"Together," Harry had said immediately, glancing at her as if it had been understood all along and there was no need to bring it up.

"No."

He'd paused with his foot on the bottom stair. *"What?"*

"You're not coming with us."

He had given her a look of such righteous anger that she had nearly given up right there. He had always had the power to frighten her.

Hermione had reached out and gripped the banister. She had looked both ways to ensure that they were entirely alone. *"Listen to me. This is for your protection—"*

"We made Expecto Sacrificum for that."

"Yes. But you can't go back to the Dursleys'. You can't go to Sirius's—you can't go anywhere, Harry. You're a target. You know you are."

Harry had stood there, silent and furious, and stared at her.

"You'll go into hiding and you'll wait. I'm going to be your Secret Keeper. And I'm not going to tell anyone. Not even Ron."

Harry had gaped. *"But you have to—he'll—"*

"No. I want him protected too. And myself. I won't have a repeat of what happened before, and if Ron were to be the Secret Keeper... Harry, he's been taken once. I won't have him taken again. And if he is taken and they determine that he's participated in the Fidelius, they'll strip it off him and break his mind and kill him for what he knows."

"Then what about you?"

"I have better mental control. The day we leave here, Ron and I are both going back to the Burrow, and he's going to think you're coming with us. But after the Leaving Feast, you and I are going to wait for him to go to sleep, and then we'll perform the Fidelius Charm in secret. You'll leave Hogwarts straight away. You'll write a note to Ron saying that you're going to meet us—that you feel it's safer if we go separately. But you won't come. And when Ron and I get to the Burrow, we'll find another note from you, and it'll say that you're staying on your own, and that for all our sakes you couldn't warn us. And I'm going to pretend that I had no idea."

"And where should I go?"

"That's up to you. Tell me when you've decided, so that I can keep in touch with you... Harry?"

Harry had looked so pale and shaken that Hermione had been unsure how to proceed.

"What about everyone else?" he'd finally managed. *"What about the Weasleys? Sirius and Remus? What about Ginny—where will she go?"*

"She'll be with us."

"All of you at the Burrow? How is that safe? And how will everyone know where I am, if I'm needed? Don't I have to be there for Expecto Sacrificum? I can't just hide until it's over—it's me that's supposed to end it."

"I'm going to keep in contact with you. I'll keep you informed of everything the Order is doing. Sirius and Remus plan to keep moving around, and yes, we'll be at the Burrow."

"That's not safe enough."

"That's all there is. We can take care of ourselves."

"And I can't?"

"Please, Harry." Hermione had taken both his hands, shocked at how cold they were. "Let me do this. I'm the right person to do this, you know I am. It's going to be hard, it's going to be horrible, but it won't last forever, and this way, at the end, there's a chance we'll all still have each other. I can't lose you. I can't. I look at Sirius and Remus and I see what they've lost—what you've lost—and I can't let it happen again. You're part of my heart, Harry. Don't make me live my whole life wishing I could have done something. Just let me do it now, while there's a chance, and let me keep it quiet. You know I can. You know this is right. Because if it's you that has to end it, then you have to be alive to do it, and you won't live long once we leave here if you're not entirely protected. Please, please say yes. You have to say yes. If not for yourself, then for the people who love you and need you."

Harry had looked down at their hands, his eyes glassy. For a long time, he had not moved or spoken. And then—*"Do you know how to do the charm?"* he'd barely whispered.

Relief had flooded Hermione. He was much closer to agreeing, if he was asking that. *"Yes. I've been studying it for months. I had a feeling we'd need it."*

"How are you going to stop Ron from coming to find me and making a target of himself?"

"Tell him in your note, in no uncertain terms, that he's to do no such thing or he'll end up killing all of us including me. Make a point of that. And then leave the rest to me."

"Planned it all out, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Then how... what am I supposed to..." Harry had looked up at her, clearly lost. *"What am I supposed to do on my own? By myself?"*

Hermione had choked and thrown her arms around him, holding him tight though he had hardly held her back. *"Just be careful. I don't care what else you do. Just be careful."* She had kissed his cheek and pulled away, trying not to cry and failing miserably.

"You should have told me this before," Harry had said croakily. *"I hardly have any time left and I have to spend it all on the N.E.W.T.s."*

"Forget the N.E.W.T.s." Hermione had laughed and sobbed together at the look of shock on his face. *"Skive off your exams and play chess with Ron. I wish you could go out and play Quidditch."*

"It's too unsafe."

"Yes."

Harry had stared away at the wall. *"At least I don't have a wife and a child,"* he'd said in a strange, absent voice. *"My dad was mad to take her, I'd never—"* He had stopped short, and his cheeks had flushed dull red.

"He didn't take her," Hermione had said quietly. *"She went on her own."*

"I know. Never mind. Hermione... are you sure you—"

"More than sure."

"And our friends won't know this, no one's going to risk themselves to find me, you promise me that."

"I swear it."

Harry had nodded. And then immediately another cloud of anger had passed over his face and darkened his eyes. "No," he'd said grimly. *"It doesn't matter if you're right—this is wrong. It doesn't matter how careful you are. They'll find you. All of you. And they'll—"* He had choked on the next words. *"They'll torture you,"* he'd managed, looking furious. Frightened. *"They'll kill you to find me, and I won't leave you to that. I'm not going off and being safe and leaving you and the Weasleys to cover for me. I'm not."*

"Harry..." Hermione's heart had plummeted. She had been so close. *"It's as much to protect us as anything else—we need you alive. You're necessary—you know you are—just like your dad was, Harry, please—I know their bluff didn't work, but your dad knew it was necessary to hide, he knew he had to survive—"*

"I didn't know him," Harry had said heatedly, *"but I know why he went into hiding, Hermione, and it wasn't so he'd survive, it was so I would. I haven't got anyone to think of like that, I haven't got a wife and baby to protect, I'm free to fight like he wasn't, and I will fight, I won't stand back—"*

"Oh Harry, we've been over this, you're not thinking straight, of course you'll fight. You've never stood back in your life, that's not the question, this isn't a matter of pride, if you die then he wins—listen to me—"

"I won't hide." And his voice had been as full of iron as it had ever been in all their friendship. *"I won't leave. That's final."*

"Please," Hermione had said desperately, knowing from his eyes that she had lost. *"You have to, Harry, you have to."*

But he had refused to consider it further, and after several more useless pleas, Hermione had all but given up. They couldn't keep talking about it in the corridor anyway. Someone would hear them and the option of using the Fidelius would be lost.

"Fine," she had said wearily. *"I'll... I'll give you till the Leaving Feast to come up with a better idea. But if you can't, then you have to do this, because if you think I'm going to stand here and let you leave this school and walk out into the world without any sort of shield and get yourself killed right in front of my face, then you don't know me very well. I'll body bind you and make you do this, Harry. I'm not joking."*

Harry had only set his mouth and shaken his head.

And that had been the end of it. Together they'd gone up to the Astronomy tower and looked up at the stars, neither of them speaking. Together they'd gone back to Gryffindor Tower to find Ron sleeping in a chair and snoring happily, *Quidditch Times* open across his stomach. Harry had stood over him for a moment with a look on his face that broke Hermione's heart, before he had turned and gone upstairs by himself.

And they would perform the Fidelius Charm tonight. He was still clearly furious with her, but he had not come up with a better idea, and the look on his face all afternoon had been so quietly, desperately sad that she knew he must have realized that it was his only option. He still hadn't told her where he planned to hide. Professor McGonagall had told him once that he was welcome to stay at Hogwarts as long as he needed, but when Hermione had suggested that to him, he'd only said that he wouldn't stay and jeopardize the school any longer.

She wondered where he would go.

Keeping hold of Ron's hand, Hermione glanced left, at Harry. He met her eyes with a look that said more than he could have spoken, and he swallowed so hard that she could see it. She wanted to tell him that it was all right. That he would make it—that she would *make* him make it. But to say anything at all was to reveal herself to Ron, who knew her far too well not to question her. She turned back to the high table.

"In my nearly seventy years at this school I have rarely seen such spirit in the face of adversity."

Hermione could hear Professor McGonagall now—the Headmistress's words had Dumbledore's ring to them. Hermione had never heard her sound so gentle. She studied the rest of her teachers'

faces and saw the same gentleness in many of their eyes. Professor Vector, Professor Sprout, Professor Figg. People who had given her a whole new life and tested her in every possible way. Ways that, sometimes, they should not have tested her... Hermione searched for Snape but he was not in his chair and she wondered where he was. Perhaps he had been called to duty in the night, by Remus or Moody. Hermione wished he were there; strangely enough, she knew that she would miss him very much.

Professor McGonagall's eyes drifted to the Gryffindor table and traveled to where Harry, Ron and Hermione sat together. "I'm very proud of this seventh year class." Her voice was suspiciously scratchy. "Proud of your advancements and accomplishments, and proud of you for finishing. Though I will be very sorry to see you go."

A stifled, miserable noise made Hermione turn her head. From across the table, Ginny gazed unabashedly at Harry, her eyes full of tears as if she knew he was about to disappear, though she couldn't have known that. Several other Gryffindors glanced sympathetically at her and Hermione couldn't help but look at her too; Ginny's emotions were always oddly compelling. There was something so quietly grown-up about her these days that she almost seemed older than the rest of them, and Hermione wasn't too surprised to see that Harry was looking back at Ginny without apology. He had seemed newly conscious of her since nine days ago, when they had built *Expecto Sacrificum*. Not that his consciousness had come to anything. Not that it would have a chance to come to anything for a long, long time.

"I thank you for your hard work and for the gifts you have brought to this school. I wish you... safe and useful lives." Professor McGonagall looked to be working hard to keep her composure. She gripped her goblet in her hand and raised it high, her eyes shining. "Good luck to all of you."

Hermione was dimly surprised to see that Blaise Zabini was the first to stand. She would have expected him, and all the rest of the Slytherins, to stay seated throughout the toast. Perhaps she'd underestimated some of them. They were nearly all standing. So were many of the Ravenclaws. Some of the Hufflepuffs. A few of the younger Gryffindors. Hermione moved to stand, as well.

It all happened so fast that neither she nor anyone else could have prevented it. The standing students, like the parts of some terrible machine, moved with rapid precision to new positions in the hall, wands drawn, faces intent. Spells were hissed in overlapping succession, leaving Hermione dizzy and weak, unsure of what had been said.

Before she could even reach for her wand she felt her wrists bound. She didn't know how it had happened. She tried to speak and found that she was mute. Movement of any kind was nearly impossible—whatever they had done it was quick and it was total—there was no rustling in the hall, no sound of struggle. There were no screams, and the students in control did not speak or threaten. It was an elegant attack. Hermione could only move her neck a little, and her eyes, which she did frantically, taking in the scene in its frightening totality.

The students were frozen in their seats, hands, bodies and mouths clearly bound by some very serious magic. The younger attackers and most of the standing Hufflepuffs that Hermione could see stood guard at the lower sections of the House tables, where they oversaw the younger students. The older Slytherins and Ravenclaws had taken on the more difficult target areas. There was a student manning every teacher. A student on every student who might have posed a serious threat. Across the table, the tip of a wand was being held to Neville Longbottom's throat. Another student covered Parvati. Lavender. Seamus and Dean. Crabbe and Goyle and Millicent Bulstrode, along with two sixth year Slytherin boys, stood in a motionless row behind their hostages, blank-faced, as if awaiting further instructions.

A sixth year Slytherin girl had her wand to Ginny's temple, but Ginny did not even look afraid; her eyes were still on Harry, much as they had been just a moment ago. Her expression had barely changed, except that now she seemed to be watching his chest. Hermione could not turn to see it, but she knew, with a sickening thud of her gut, that someone must have had a wand on Harry. And one on Ron. She could hear both their breathing—heavy and ragged, voiceless and furious.

She felt the tip of a wand slide across her own throat and she swallowed the bile that threatened to rise. She did not know who her aggressor was—and then a quiet, mocking laugh over her head made Hermione wish she could bring back both her elbows with enough force to break Pansy Parkinson's legs.

"Hufflepuffs out first." The voice was Blaise Zabini's and he was on her left. At Ron's back. "Ravenclaws in a line behind them. Teachers next. And then the Gryffindors—Potter last."

Hermione wished she knew who was at Harry's back.

"To the doors."

To the doors—then they were being taken outside—but for what? Who was waiting?

You know who's waiting. Just like fifth year. Only this time we can't fight. And Dumbledore's not

here to shut them out.

Hermione saw the captive Hufflepuffs rise, terror and the shock of betrayal written in their faces as they were led away by their own housemates. Her heart went out to the little ones, whose tears coursed down their cheeks as they were marched away to the doors of the Great Hall. She heard them leave. She realized with grim satisfaction that, in order to usher them outside, the attackers would have to give them back the use of their legs. But then again, she wondered how helpful it would really be to run when she had no hands to pull her wand and no voice to say her spells. Better to follow until she could make her way free. If she could make her way free. She began to concentrate on freeing her body from whatever spell it was under, but it was not Imperius, and didn't seem like it could be broken through sheer strength of will.

"Take the Ravenclaws."

The Ravenclaws were marched silently out by many of their fellows, looking appalled and horrified. Their own had turned on them and they had no voices to express how they felt about it, but their eyes were dark with fury and fear and loathing. Dim with tears. Hermione heard a harsh, faraway voice telling different students to go different ways, when they reached the doors. She had no idea what it meant.

"The professors."

One of them has to know a way to break this. One of them has to be able to do something about this.

But they filed out in a long, grim line, each looking as if he or she was working inwardly to break what could not be broken.

Snape. Hermione's heart soared. Snape isn't in here. He'll be able to stop this, if only he sees. And he'll see. No one could miss this.

"Gryffindors. Keep Potter at the back of the line."

Hermione's legs felt as if they'd suddenly thawed; they tingled and ached like they'd been asleep for hours. She stood on them, though it was painful, and turned left towards the doors.

Her blood went cold.

Professor Sinistra had her wand to the back of Harry's head. Harry's shoulders rose and fell rapidly as he was escorted out of his place in line and taken to stand behind Ron, who had shuffled into line behind Hermione.

As long as we three are close together, we'll be fine. As long as they don't think to separate us, we'll be fine.

They were taken to the doors and more than once Hermione thought of running for it, but she knew it was no good to run. Not yet. The Gryffindors queued up at the doors, and one by one they were evaluated and sent one way or the other. Hermione watched and listened, baffled.

"Considine, Ashley. Right."

The little second year turned right. Into the castle—not towards the grounds—Hermione wondered what was happening.

"Hammond, Robert. Left."

The fifth year boy went left, towards the entrance stairs. So he was being taken outside. Hermione narrowed her eyes, trying to understand.

"Anderson, Craig. Right." A boy in Ginny's class disappeared.

"Robinson, Sharon. Left. Bumgardner, Emma." The Slytherin at the door snorted. "Right, unfortunately. Squire, Beth. Right. Sheehy, Kathleen. Right. Beam, Polly. Left."

They were all in Ginny's class. All of them girls Hermione knew well enough. And as the separation procedure began to make sense to her, Hermione began to feel so sick that she wondered if she would throw up.

Sharon Robinson's Muggle-born. Polly Beam's Muggle-born. And Robert Hammond... Robert Hammond is half-blood.

"Weasley, Ginny. Ri—"

"Left," called out Blaise, from behind them in the hall. "Send the Weasleys left with the rest of the rubbish."

Hermione watched Ginny disappear with her red head held high and her profile strangely unperturbed.

"Thomas, Dean. Left. Brown, Lavender. Left. Finnegan, Seamus. Left. Longbottom, Neville. Right."

Neville lifted his trembling chin, turned left, and marched out. The boy at the door tried to stop him.

"Let him go," Blaise called, sounding unconcerned. "His loss, and certainly not ours."

"Patil, Parvati. Right."

Parvati was shaking. But she turned left as well, and Hermione felt a surge of real love for her.

"Idiots," Blaise muttered.

"Granger, Hermione." The Slytherin boy was in fifth year. Or fourth. Hermione wasn't sure. But he was tall and he looked down at her with a smile of twisted pleasure, tapping his quill against a scroll of parchment. "Well. Look who's quiet, for once. And look who's going *left*."

Hermione stayed where she was. They were being sent left to die, she knew that. Separated for whatever slaughter waited on the lawns. Just as clearly, she knew that she was not going to die—not here, today. Not like this, not simply because of her blood. She hesitated, and she tried to work her mouth.

"No."

Her heart began to pound. She'd said it. Either she was breaking the spell, or it was wearing off.

"NO."

Behind her, Ron stepped up so close that she could feel the whole of him against her back and she leaned against him for support, wrenching at her hands with all her mental might. She only needed her wand and her voice—and she had her voice.

"What are you waiting for?" Blaise shouted. "Do what you need to do, but send her *out*."

The Slytherin boy dropped his parchment and pulled his wand. He pointed it at Hermione's legs and muttered a spell that made her shout with pain. She buckled and fell back. Had Ron not been there, she would have crumpled.

"If you don't want it again, you'd better be on your way," snarled the boy. And beneath his snarl there was a rumbling noise that did not come from him. It seemed to be rising from the depths of the castle, deep and frightening.

"No." It was all Hermione was capable of saying, but she planned to say it until there was no fight left in her. The floor beneath her feet began to tremble slightly, as if an earthquake were beginning.

The boy narrowed his eyes at her. "Worse then," he said quietly, and pointed his wand at her stomach. But his fingers were shaking. He looked at them in confusion, and then around at the walls of the corridor, fear obvious in his eyes. The rumbling had grown too loud to ignore and the floor was really shaking now. Hermione leaned against Ron again, desperate to stay on her feet.

Shouting—loud, frantic shouting from the lawns made the boy's head turn. He peered down the corridor. "Zabini," he yelled worriedly. "Something's going on out here, you'd better—"

"You'd better bloody well send them *out there*. They're what's being waited for you total waste of—Sinistra, get them *out of here*—"

But Blaise's voice became a scream of pain. His scream was quickly followed by a roar from the boy in the corridor who had been sorting the students; he clutched his head and his eyes rolled; he curled in a ball on the ground and begged for mercy. Hermione watched in horror, and was about to run, when the painful screams were drowned out by a much more chilling noise—a noise like thousands of bones breaking together. It came from over their heads. Hermione whirled and so did Ron and Harry—Sinistra had turned as well, and taken two steps back into the Great Hall, her wand hand outstretched.

The enchanted ceiling was cracking. Splitting. Huge chunks of painted stone were falling from it, dropping to the floor like swirling bits of cloud, then smashing to the floor and flying into thousands of shards. Stone pummeled the tables, the teachers' chairs, the beautiful windows. And beneath the splitting dome, Blaise Zabini lay twitching, his mouth open in a silent scream.

An enormous slab of sky broke away from the ceiling. It tumbled fast—there was no time to stop it—and it crushed Zabini into the stone floor before Hermione had the sense to turn away. She gagged and pressed her mouth shut—she really *was* going to throw up—

"Hurry." Professor Sinistra had turned her wand on them, but, to Hermione's shock, the professor only set their hands free. "Hurry—they're deliberately destroying the hall from the outside—they didn't want anyone to have an opportunity to hide." She pushed Harry, who stood dumbstruck, towards the door. "Go!" she urged. "Go—you're needed, all of you. I'm right behind you."

They ran flat out towards the entrance doors. Hermione tried to process, as they raced for the entrance doors, what had just happened. Had Professor Sinistra cursed Zabini and his fellow? She must have. Had she been working both sides, like Snape? Perhaps. How many more secrets were there—when would they be shocked again—or would they ever see each other after this? Was this the end?

They paused at the front doors and glanced at each other for a split second that was an eternity. They pulled their wands.

Ron shoved the doors open.

Hermione saw several members of the Order already fighting—several students already freed and battling Death Eaters—a few younger students lying horribly still and quiet on the grass... And then the flashing white light of a curse came hurtling towards her and she spun to deflect it, forgetting everything but survival—survival—survival—

“Preoccuposis!” she shouted, her voice high-pitched and terrified—her heart beating so quickly that it was painful—she could hear Ron’s raw shouts behind her, Ginny’s distant and clinically chanted hexes, Harry’s ironclad incantations. But she could not turn to see what they were warding off, because there was another curse coming at her and this one was brighter—faster—more frightening—

“Finite Incantatem!”

* * * * *

Hermione woke with a start, breathing hard. She sat up and hugged her knees, disoriented, and she looked around the room. She was in the front room of Lupin Lodge; a book lay tumbled on the floor and someone had put a blanket over her. Crookshanks was perched on the top of the sofa, staring down at her as if he knew to be worried. She must have fallen asleep while reading—there was no battle here. No Death Eaters, no crumbling school, no curses. She was all right. It was all over. She buried her face in her knees for a moment, amazed at how real it could seem, in sleep. She wondered if it would always be so vivid and imagined that it would. Those were not the sorts of memories that lost their color. Ever.

She lifted her head after a moment and squinted; the light outside the windows was dawn blue. It was too dark to be much later than five. Still tired, Hermione slumped back and shut her eyes, wanting to sleep a little longer.

But her eyes would not stay closed, and the shadows in the room seemed unfriendly; the dream had stirred something ugly and cold in her heart and she knew she couldn’t sleep any more.

A scraping noise from the kitchen made Hermione jump; she tensed and listened, too highly strung to be immediately sensible. Crookshanks jumped to the floor and ran in the direction of the noise. A moment later, someone began to hum. *Probably not a Death Eater*, Hermione thought wryly, getting to her feet and shuffling into the kitchen to find Sirius already dressed for work. She leaned against the worktop.

“You’re up early,” she croaked.

Sirius whirled, but relaxed when he saw her. She wondered if he ever had bad dreams. Even if he did, he didn’t look gaunt and shadowy today—rather he seemed extremely young and manic as he moved hurriedly about the kitchen. “Tea?”

Hermione nodded, and a cup materialized before her in the air. She closed her hands around it and felt warmer. “Thank you.”

“Ginny’s up too—at least, I saw her light.”

Hermione was surprised. Ginny was like Ron that way; both of them slept until the last possible minute. “Oh, would you tell Ron I’m sorry I didn’t visit last night? I meant to, but I fell asleep on the sofa.”

“He already knows. Who do you think stopped by and covered you up?” Sirius winked.

“Oh.” Hermione smiled into her tea and decided that she would visit the Notch tonight, and make it up to Ron.

“I’ll tell him though,” Sirius said. “And before I leave—I meant to tell you the other night that your spell sounds brilliant. How’s it coming along?”

“Quickly.” The last of Hermione’s sleepiness ebbed away and she was glad to be awake. She could get some work done before she went to the Burrow. “It’s mapped. I only need to test and adjust it... which is the problem, really. I can’t exactly create a duplicate of a residual to test it on.”

“Would you show me?” Sirius looked eager. “Remus said it’s impressive.” He smiled at her.

Hermione wasn’t sure she trusted his smile. It seemed too charming for five in the morning. She remembered Ron’s warning that she shouldn’t give Sirius information, and she narrowed her eyes. “It won’t work on the Dementors, you know. It’s too small.”

“No, I understand.” Sirius looked a bit sheepish. “I wasn’t entirely myself the other night. I *am* interested in the spell for personal reasons, but I’m not entirely selfish—not entirely.” He smiled again. “I hope it’s effective, Hermione. It would be...”

“Miraculous.” Hermione laughed a little, trying to keep her spirits light. “Still, I have to try. Yes, I’ll show you—my wand’s in the living room.”

Sirius followed her into the front room, where she put down her tea and picked up her wand.

“This is only the map,” she said, and chanted the spell as she flicked her wand to show him.

The room lit up in strange, dancing red and blue shadows, and a golden light washed over the two of them. Gaping, Sirius reached out his hands and dragged his fingers through the illusion.

"Hermione," he said, sounding impressed.

"It's not *very* complicated," she said happily. It was nice to be thought impressive by a wizard like Sirius. "You've made far more complex maps—the Marauder's Map has about a thousand more levels—"

"What are the blue rays?"

"The tears. The path the tears will take."

Sirius studied it for several minutes, and continued to ask questions until he seemed satisfied. "And you'll use it on both of your parents at once, or—?"

"Both at once. Because it's small, but very powerful and it... it's going to affect the whole room. The area of the room. And I don't know how it will affect me, when I cast it..." Hermione trailed off. "I'm going to need help. I haven't done enough really big magic."

Sirius glanced at her. "I don't know about that," he said.

"Not on people. Not by myself."

"Well, if you want help casting it, I'd be happy to assist. So would Remus, I imagine. In fact, he'll probably insist."

Hermione nodded, flicked her wrist, and watched the shimmering map dissolve.

"Thanks for showing me," Sirius said, looking very thoughtful. "If you have it drawn up on parchment, I'd like to make a copy—just to study," he protested, when Hermione gave him a shrewd look. "I was a halfway decent student, once upon a time." He grinned, and headed to the hallway. "I'd like to try a little Thinking of my own. See you later."

Hermione turned away and rolled her eyes. The arrogance of him, expecting to be able to Think properly, when he'd never even studied the process. Then again, he *was* the sort of person who made up Marauder's Maps, and he had turned himself into an Animagus when he was just fifteen. Perhaps his arrogance was deserved.

Just as she heard the soft *pop* of Disapparation that meant that Sirius had gone to work, Hermione also heard a noise in the study. She went towards it. Perhaps Remus was already awake, and she could ask him to help her with the spell. It was ready to be tested. She was almost certain.

But it was Ginny who sat in the study, cross-legged in a big stuffed chair by the fire, idly stirring a cauldron while she pored over papers in her lap.

"Flight maintenance," she said dully, when Hermione came in, "is achieved by: A. Continued concentration. B. Charms pre-placed within the given vehicle. C. Parallel arithmantic paths. D. A, B and C—or E. Both B and C."

"What is this?"

Ginny sighed. "Practice N.E.W.T. exams in Magic Theory. This is exam number one. Charms."

"Sirius said he saw your light upstairs, I didn't even hear you come down."

"I Apparated, I'm lazy."

Hermione hardly agreed. It wasn't yet six in the morning and Ginny was working on Wolfsbane Potion and studying for exams at the same time. "Do you know the answer?"

Ginny chewed her lip for a minute. "It's D or E, isn't it?"

Hermione winced apologetically. "No, it's B. Concentration is good for getting the broom to hover, but flight maintenance is all charm work—think about it. When you're flying it's not like doing spell work, you don't have to keep the idea of flying in your mind the whole time. And the arithmantic paths in flight charms aren't parallel—they're interlocking. Webbed. You know, like a net, for support."

Ginny hung her head and groaned. "Take my exams for me," she demanded. "Use a Polyjuice Potion."

"I can't, that's cheating."

"I'm *joking*." Ginny lifted her head and laughed. "Unless you change your mind, of course. I'd love to get a hundred N.E.W.T.s." She leaned over the cauldron and peered at her potion, then sat back and kept stirring. "Why are you up so early?"

"I couldn't sleep. You?"

"I had a nightmare. And I have things to do, so I didn't bother trying to go back to sleep."

Hermione pulled the other study chair close to Ginny's; she sat down and touched Ginny's arm. "I'm sorry," she said. She had used to be there to help Ginny with the nightmares, but lately she had often slept at Ron's, and had forgot all about it.

"Oh, it wasn't a bad one." Ginny shrugged. "Just a weird one. Very short. I dreamed the ceiling in the Great Hall was falling—I dreamed I saw what happened to Blaise Zabini, and I wasn't even *in* there for that. I never have dreams about that day."

Hermione stared at her.

"What?" Ginny demanded.

"I... that was the same dream I was having." Hermione frowned. "The same nightmare."

"Oh!" Ginny looked extremely pleased. "Then I'm feeling dreams—that's so *good*—that means I'm really far along. Other Healers have said that in the early stages of their human healing development, when they were finally getting a grasp on what they would be able to accomplish, they started feeling dreams. It doesn't last, apparently. It's not something I'll always do, it's just a phase. The Empathy is tuning itself while I sleep, because it's trying to reach its potential. At least, that's what the books say. My extra sense searches out trouble in the household or environment around me, and sort of... teaches itself." She looked pensively into her lap. "I'm so close now," she said to herself. "Almost there."

"It's a shame they don't offer a N.E.W.T. in Empathic Magic."

"I know!" Ginny looked up. "I love studying Healing. But then, it's relevant." She looked down at her practice papers. "This stuff isn't. And it's boring."

Hermione bit her tongue. It was all very relevant to *her*.

"It's relevant," came Remus's scratchy voice from the doorway. He'd crept up on them silently and was watching Ginny's progress with the potion. "And exciting, in my opinion. Perhaps your professor is to blame—a boring professor is the death of any subject." He grinned a bit and looked at Hermione. "Spell work at the Burrow today?" he asked.

She nodded. "But not until this afternoon. Fleur wants the morning to herself, to sort out a few kinks in her own spell casting before we adjust the spell again."

"Well, you've got some time to spare," Remus said. "It's barely seven now. Perhaps you'd like to take over Ginny's morning lessons?"

Ginny's eyes widened in something like horror and Hermione laughed. "No, no..." she said. "If *you're* boring, I can't imagine what I'd be."

Remus sat down on the sofa. "I have to admit, I'm not much in the mood for teaching a proper lesson, today. I've just had an idea."

"Well?" Ginny said, when Remus did not continue to reveal what was going on in his head.

"I think I can prove to you just how relevant and important charm work can be." Remus turned to address Hermione. "How's that Weeping Spell coming along?"

Hermione felt her stomach tighten with anticipation. "It's... it's as far as it can be, I think, without actually trying it," she said slowly. "Do you—would you be able to work with me on it this morning?"

"I think now is as good of a time as any. Ginny can see how important it is to understand the arithmantic properties behind spells *and* enhance her Empathic powers; you can test the accuracy of your Thinking abilities; and I can practice a powerful spell—something I haven't done in quite a while."

"Really?" Hermione found that she was not frightened. She wanted to try it. She had to know. "You think it's all right to just go and try it on my parents, right now?"

"As soon as Ginny's dressed." Remus rose from the sofa.

Hermione couldn't help herself; she clapped her hands together and grinned—and then suddenly her stomach gave a terrified lurch after all. "Remus?" she asked nervously. "If we're going to try this, I don't think I can... I'll need some help, because it's a really powerful spell, and—"

Remus stopped to touch her arm on his way to the door. "Of course I'll help," he said. "I was going to insist."

"Sirius said you would."

"And to think, Divination was always his worst subject. I'm going to have some toast," Remus said. "Let's meet back here in half an hour, if you can wait that long."

Hermione nodded, and as soon as he left, turned to Ginny, who was still stirring the Wolfsbane Potion.

"Is it all right with you, Ginny?" Hermione asked. "I mean, we'll need your help sensing their auras after the spell is cast and I know that the last time you were near them it was difficult. I don't want to—"

Ginny waved a hand at her. "This is wonderful," she said. "I was so busy with N.E.W.T. preparation that I never finished my Transfiguration essay. Besides, I told you, I *want* to try to help your parents. I can't think of a better use for my skills right now."

Heading upstairs for a quick preparatory meditation before they departed to St. Mungo's, Hermione decided that it wouldn't be too detrimental to allow Ginny access to just a few of her old Transfiguration essays. It was all that she had to give at the moment, and seemed a minor price to pay for the opportunity to see her parents laugh and smile again.

* * * * *

Ginny pulled her white St. Mungo's labcoat tighter around her, and looked through the window of the door to the Grangers' hospital room. She had wanted to be inside the room while they performed the spell, but Remus and Hermione had insisted that she leave. Both of them had been afraid that any change in the room's emotion could have a negative effect on her.

Remus was standing on Mr. Granger's side of the bed. His back was to Ginny, and from his stance, she could tell that he was apprehensive, yet calm. Hermione, standing in front of her mother, had her eyes closed and kept nodding her head, as if trying to reassure herself. The Grangers, unaware of what was about to happen although Hermione had told them, lay in their bed, their open eyes staring straight ahead, frozen in terror. Ginny shivered.

Hermione opened her eyes. For a moment, she looked like her parents—her eyes were wide and glassy, and the expression on her face, though not one of terror, was one of tense anticipation. She nodded once, said something, and both she and Remus raised their wands over the bed. They stayed like that for what seemed like a very long time, and Ginny could almost feel her own arm hurting. Then, just when she thought she could bear it no longer, Hermione lowered her wand with a flourish so that the tip hovered just over her mother's head; Remus mirrored her action over Mr. Granger. Together, they chanted *Experiri Lacrimus Salacium!* so loudly that Ginny heard it in the hallway and felt something come loose inside her as well.

When Hermione had shown Ginny the spell at Lupin Lodge, she'd been impressed. But that had been nothing compared to what was happening inside the Grangers' room. This was real magic—not some simple Summoning Charm. This was like the Patronus spell, and the Sacrifice spell, and Ginny wondered how many witches and wizards would ever have a chance to see so many powerful things in their lifetimes. She hoped that there wouldn't be a need ever again.

The points of light from the spell formed an enormous canopy over the Grangers' bed. They hovered for a moment, and then, like lightning, shot down and connected with hundreds of points along the Grangers' bodies. The light seemed to be pulsating, and the red knots—the pain knots—that Ginny had seen when the spell had been performed in theory, did not seem to be appearing. Was the spell working? She hadn't considered the possibility that it could fail, that it might not be effective. *Lacrimus Salacium* seemed to be having an effect on her, even from outside the room, and tears started to roll down her cheeks. She checked Hermione's face for a sign of disappointment, or defeat, but Hermione looked confident now—her chin was up and her mouth slightly open. The spell was causing air to move in the room and Ginny could see papers rustling on the night table.

Finally, the streams of light that were streaking into the Grangers started to change color. It was a deeper, darker red—almost like blood, than it had been in the spell when Ginny had seen it earlier. It flowed upwards from the Grangers, using the pathways of lights as veins, and then, at the top, the veins thickened, blurred and began twisting and turning around each other.

Ginny's head began to pound, and she put both hands over her stomach; she was going to be sick. It *hurt*. Now that it was being released from the Grangers' bodies, she could feel the residual of the Cruciatus Curse in the air around her—the walls and door could not block it out—Ginny had to struggle to breathe. Was this what it felt like to be hit by an Unforgivable—or was this only half the pain of it? She wasn't screaming, she wasn't on the floor; this couldn't be the whole of it, but it was enough to be torturous. Clutching her stomach and fighting to stay quiet, she leaned heavily on the door and watched as Hermione and Remus continued to work. The Grangers' beds were shaking.

Now the red streaks were forming knots and colliding with brutal ferocity. Instead of bouncing off each other, they coalesced and merged, forming an enormous, rotating ball of anguish and terror, making Ginny dizzy with pain and fear. The Cruciatus was horrible. Horrible. And Ron had suffered it too—Harry had endured it—Remus and Sirius had felt it in their lifetimes—Ginny knew now how lucky she was to have escaped this curse in its full force. She stifled a moan and squinted through the window as the light in the whole room changed to gold, almost as if the sun were rising.

Crack! Ginny stumbled back from the door a few inches, and clutched at her heart. The noise had come from inside the Grangers' room, and with it, the pain in her body lessened by half. She could breathe freely. When she had recovered herself and aligned her face once more with the window in the door, she could see that Hermione and Remus had both jumped back a few inches from the bed as well. Hermione's face was damp and glowing and Remus's hair was plastered to his head, as if the room had filled with moisture. Expecting to see the bluish tears from her earlier

view of the spell, Ginny was surprised to see instead that the red ball had split into two pieces and they were both rotating over the Grangers' bodies. A look of comprehension passed over Hermione's face, and she said something to Remus that Ginny couldn't hear.

Together, they raised their wands again, and each pointed them at a different red orb. With a swift downward movement, they both lowered their wands, and the orbs came crashing down to the Grangers, bursting upon impact with their bodies and seeming to diffuse and pulse through them so that it was almost like Ginny was actually seeing an aura with her eyes, rather than feeling it with her mind. She gasped at the beauty of it, and in surprise, because she hadn't been able to sense it when she'd been in the room with the Grangers before. She allowed the door to support her as she continued to watch.

There was a sudden calm. The room seemed instantly to return to its normal lighting and appearance. The papers stopped moving, the bed stopped shaking, and Hermione and Remus returned to their earlier stances of anticipation. Ginny felt incredible relief as the remainder of the residual ebbed away and stopped causing her pain—and then she felt a stab of disappointment. Where were the tears? Hermione was watching something on her mother's face, and Ginny turned her attention there as well.

She gasped.

Tears. She could see them. They were brighter, and more... opaque than her own tears, which continued to wet her face. Mr. Granger had them too. Their eyes were still open, and they still looked terrified, but their faces were damp, and these tears seemed to flow down their cheeks and into their open mouths, as if trying to feed them relief. And then, slowly, the eyelids closed, and for the first time since being hit with the Cruciatus Curse, the Grangers looked almost peaceful.

The tears were rolling down Hermione's face as well, and Remus crossed the room to embrace her. After a moment, he released her and said something that made Hermione laugh. Neither could take their eyes away from the Grangers. The tears had stopped, but not dried, and Hermione fell to her knees and peered closely into her mother's face. Remus looked over the door, and smiled at Ginny. He said something to Hermione, and she nodded, and they both motioned to Ginny to enter the room.

Ginny opened the door cautiously, not wanting to disrupt any magic that might still be floating through the room. Not wanting to walk into any remainder of that horrible curse that might still be in the air.

"Is it ... finished?" she asked. The room looked calm, but Ginny stayed back.

"Come closer, Ginny," Remus said, motioning to Mr. Granger. "I think it will be all right if you want to try some preliminary sensing. Don't think of Healing yet. Just assess the situation."

Hermione was still breathing hard; she looked exhausted. "Did you feel anything out there?" she asked faintly.

"No," Ginny lied, and walked over to the side of the bed. She stood still for a moment, then closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She held her hands over Mr. Granger's head, not knowing what to expect—not expecting to feel anything. But something was there. It wasn't like the knots she'd felt around Harry and Ron. Nor was it like the searing points of pain she'd felt around Draco. This was shapeless, and formless—more like a fog. But thicker. Like a heavy glue or a very-thick potion. It was suffocating. Something was damaged. Physically. The aura was trying to heal but finding resistance and it could not adhere to their bodies. It was the most sickening thing Ginny had ever felt.

Curious, she let her hands hover lower, trying to break through the fog. Her fingers began to tingle, and she could feel something unpleasant swirling beneath them. It was familiar. Ginny realized it was the same pain that she'd felt earlier from the Grangers, but it was weakening. Dissipating. After about a minute, her hands began to throb and she pulled them away with a sharp intake of breath.

When she opened her eyes, Hermione and Remus were staring at her with hopeful expressions. She smiled.

"I think... I think it's working, Hermione."

Hermione looked very much like she wanted to cry, but she kept her lips pursed together. Ginny continued. "I can feel an aura. It's not formed, but it's there. And the pain is still there too, but it's a bit less than it was." She thought for a moment. "Hermione, how often can you perform this spell?"

"I'm not sure. I think that once a day would be all right, but I don't think it would be good to do more than that. It's exhausting for me, so I'd be afraid to try it again right away. I don't want to hurt them."

"That's okay," Ginny said. Walking over to Mrs. Granger's side of the bed, and testing, for a

moment, whether the spell had affected her the same as her husband. "If it works this well each time, then I think I can start to work on them soon. If I can get so that I can have at least five minutes on each of them, to start, then I can really help. I hope." She paused and looked away for a moment. There was something else she wanted to tell Hermione, and it wasn't going to be easy.

"What is it, Ginny?" Hermione asked.

"They're... you should just know, Hermione, that I think there's actual physical damage to them. And I have to study that more, because so far, I've mostly been dealing with external sensations and very localized injuries. But this feels... larger, somehow. Like it's in their skin, or their tissue. I think it's going to take a lot of work."

Hermione nodded and squeezed Ginny's hand. "I'll help you research," was all she said, and Ginny laughed.

A knock at the door caused all of them to raise their heads, and Ginny saw Neville Longbottom's round face peering through the window. She smiled and motioned to him to come in. He did so, but stayed back, near the door, away from them. He looked slightly uncomfortable, and, looking around, she could understand why. They all looked a mess—Hermione's hair was sticking out all over the place, Ginny was sure that her own face was red, and the bed, she noticed, had actually moved so that it was sitting at an angle across the room.

"I, er, just came to see how your parents were doing," he said. "I was just down the hall, so I thought..." His voice trailed off. "Are they *crying*?"

Hermione quickly explained to Neville what they were trying to do. He looked amazed. When she was done, he shook his head. "You've always been brilliant, Hermione," he said, with admiration. Then he turned to Ginny, and his face grew serious. "You're a ... *Healer*. Do you realize... that's... I ... " Neville blushed and recovered himself. "I always knew there was something special about you," he said.

"Thanks," Ginny said, feeling pleased.

"I wish you all had been around when my parents..." he started, but something occurred to Ginny, and she interrupted him.

"Neville," she said. "Do you think I could... would you let me see your parents? They're in a better condition than the Grangers, and perhaps I can learn something by comparing them to each other."

"Sure," Neville said, looking, as always, surprised that someone would bother to help him with something. "When?"

"How about now?" she said, and heard Remus sigh behind her. She turned to him and smiled.

"It's *Saturday*," she said. "This won't take long."

She hugged Remus and Hermione both, and headed down the hall with Neville. The curtains in his parents' room were drawn, and it was very dark. His parents were both sitting at a little table, attempting to play cards, although Ginny wasn't sure how they could see what they were doing.

Neville gave a laugh that sounded almost frustrated. "They're being paranoid," he said. "Although I suppose I can't blame them. Every once in a while, they think someone's going to hex them from that Muggle building across the street. So they cover everything so that they can't be seen."

Ginny touched his arm in sympathy. "That's terrible," she said.

He shrugged. "I suppose. I laugh at them now and they seem to enjoy that. Watch."

Approaching his parents, Neville clapped a hand on his father's shoulder. His father jumped in his chair, and cards went flying everywhere.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" Mr. Longbottom asked.

Mrs. Longbottom screeched.

"I work here," Neville said. "And so does Ginny. She's come to check and make sure that you're okay." Ginny was glad she was wearing her St. Mungo's coat.

"Well!" Mr. Longbottom said. "You certainly frightened me. Anyone could just come in here and hex us, you know. Can't be too careful."

"I think you're being a bit paranoid," Neville said. Ginny had never heard him sound so confident about anything.

"You do?" Mrs. Longbottom said. "Really? But anyone could hide out across the street and hex us. There's that building over there."

"These windows are hex-proof," Neville laughed. "And anyone who comes here has to pass through three security points. Yes. I think you're being a bit paranoid."

The Longbottoms started to laugh as well. "I suppose you're right," Mr. Longbottom said, but when Neville moved to open the curtain, his mother let out another horrified yell.

Neville gave Ginny a look, and walked back over to stand in front of the table.

"Do you need them to lie down?" he asked.

Ginny shook her head. "They're fine like this." She bent on one knee in front of Mrs. Longbottom so that she had to look up at Mrs. Longbottom.

"Mrs. Longbottom," she said. "Can I ask you to sit here, straight in your chair and close your eyes? This won't hurt a bit."

"You're the mediwitch," Mrs. Longbottom said, willingly, and shut her eyes. Ginny closed hers as well and held her hands out to feel the aura in front of her. It was there, floating in a nebulous sea above Mrs. Longbottom's body. It didn't feel *normal* but it didn't feel anything as awful as the Grangers' either. Slowly, she moved her hands closer and let them rest just inches from Mrs. Longbottom's stomach, trying to draw out a sensation. After what seemed like several minutes, her fingers began to tingle, just as they had for the Grangers, but it was a much more gradual feeling. And then, although she had expected it, she jumped back in shock when she found the residual of the curse, buried deep within Mrs. Longbottom's being.

When she opened her eyes, Mrs. Longbottom was sleeping, and Neville was looking at her in shock.

"Wha-?" he started to ask, and then, glancing his father, stopped himself. Ginny smiled encouragingly, and moved to repeat the action on Mr. Longbottom. She was starting to feel very tired, and, once she had exacted the same results from Neville's father, she stood and let Neville guide her out of the room.

"Ginny! Are you okay? What happened?" Neville asked, as soon as they were in the corridor. He hurried to guide her to a chair.

"It's been a busy morning," she answered, and, leaning forward, put her elbows on her knees and rested her head between her hands. "It's good though, Nevillie. Your parents seem to have been healing themselves. Slowly. Very slowly. They'd probably never live long enough to heal themselves at this pace, but I think... I think that if I work with them and with the Grangers... well, to know that it's possible even to get as far along as your parents are is a good sign."

"What did you feel?" he asked. "What hurt your hands? I saw you jump."

"It's a residual," Ginny explained. "Remus worked it out. It's like the remnants of a curse—a ghost. The Cruciatus Curse is lingering inside of them. I mean, the spell itself is gone, but the effects of it are continuing to try to destroy them. And they're able to fight back. Their energy is stronger than the residual is. But it's so, so difficult."

"Are they in pain?"

"No. The pain is gone. They're not aware of it." Ginny sat up and gave Neville a hug.

"I can work with them," she said. "I can't promise anything—I don't know what's going to happen—I'm still learning. But we won't know unless we try, will we?"

"Try... you mean, try to heal them?" Neville gazed at her, his face uncomprehending..

Ginny shook her head. "I don't know what I can do for them. I might not be able to do anything."

"Still... thanks for the thought," Neville said slowly, looking a little dazed. He shook himself. "Do you need help getting anywhere? You look really tired."

"Walk me to the fireplace?"

Neville stood and held out his hand to pull Ginny up off the chair. They walked through the corridors in silence, and Ginny felt both triumphant and tired. She had the potential to do great things with this gift, she realized. And the only problem was going to be sorting out how to help everyone without collapsing from exhaustion. When they reached the fireplace, however, she felt a little better, and when she said goodbye to Neville and told him she'd return tomorrow to work on his parents, she only felt true enthusiasm. She'd be all right.

* * * * *

On the first of March, the Weasley children sat around the breakfast table at the Burrow, slumped over their tea and coffee. A giant pile of eggs sat in the middle of the table, and nineteen colorful candles floated above them.

A bit of wax dripped on Fred's hand as he reached for the spoon. "Mum," Fred rasped. "Insane."

"Too... early..." George stuck his knife into the jam jar as if it were the most difficult thing he'd ever had to do.

Ginny was so tired that she couldn't even speak. She pushed her breakfast aside, folded her arms on the table, and laid her head upon them. She didn't want to complain, because she knew that if she did someone might notice how much she was trying to do, and she couldn't stand to stop doing any of it. Remus didn't know that after he and Hermione had renewed the spell that she'd spent all day Sunday at St. Mungo's, assessing the damage in the Grangers' tissue. It was

bad, but at least Hermione's spell had worked. At least their eyes were closed, and Ginny could feel their human auras again. She had begun at their feet, and she hoped that by the time she got to their brains, she'd know what to do. But she had to keep working. Hermione had looked so much happier yesterday.

"Ginny..."

Her name swam toward her through a fog. "Mmph minute," she mumbled, and sighed into her arms. She'd get up. She'd help her mother finish tidying up the house. Adam Hopewell's friends were coming in two weeks, and the Weasleys were home to decide what they wanted to preserve from their childhood rooms and to celebrate Ron's birthday; there would be a family lunch today, and then a larger party in two weeks to celebrate Ginny's birthday as well. She didn't want to preserve much from her room—her Hogwarts letter, her books from Harry, a few trinkets her family had given her. And since Remus had given her a whole day off of classes to do this, she planned to pack up quickly and steal the rest of the time to study for her N.E.W.T.s. She couldn't fall behind. As long as she didn't fall behind, it would be all right.

"Ginny... Ginner Pinner... She's really tired, she can't even hear us."

"No I'm not," she said groggily. "Yes I can." She sat up and took a swig of coffee, though she could hardly see the cup.

"You shouldn't drink that stuff, you know," said George. "It's bad for you."

"Health lectures from the inventor of Canary Creams?" Ginny was pleased when her brothers laughed. Feeling a bit more awake, she gazed out the window in time to see the approach of the family owl. "Look, there's Thoth."

Everyone turned to the window. Poor old Errol had passed away, and Thoth was a young, brown, bright-eyed owl who had yet to struggle with any parcel, no matter how heavy. But Ginny rather missed Errol, molty and sad as he'd been, and she wasn't used to Thoth.

"*Daily Prophet*," said Bill, grabbing it out of the mail stack. "No ugly headlines today—good start."

"Sports section?" Ron held out his hand.

"Business," said Fred and George together.

As her brothers divided the paper, Ginny picked up the other mail, untied the twine, and unrolled the various bills and magazines. "*Witch Weekly* wants eligible bachelors to sign up and be fought over by desperate single witches," Ginny said, and tossed the magazine to Charlie. "Have at it."

"Except he's not eligible, is he?" Bill murmured. Charlie hit him in the arm.

But Ginny could no longer concentrate on her brothers. She had just unrolled the March issue of *Charmed Life*. She looked at the cover for a moment in stunned silence, and then slowly—slowly—she tried to hide it in her lap, under the table.

"Ickle Ginny's hiding her favorite news source," Fred crowed. They all looked at her, and Ginny flushed. "Must be another public snog. We're going to have to string Harry up if he can't behave himself—hand it over."

Ginny sat on the magazine before Fred could snatch it.

"Oooh, must be something really naughty," said Fred, waggling his eyebrows and pushing back his chair. "Shall we have a look, George?"

"Oh, I think so." George stood as well.

"No—seriously—" Ginny gripped the sides of her chair. She knew it was too late to make a run for it. "Please, it's early, don't—"

But they were on either side of her, tickling her and trying to force her out of her seat. Ginny shrieked for help, but the rest of them were clearly entertained; they only cheered the twins on.

"No, no—no—Fred, STOP!" Ginny screamed with laughter. She wouldn't be laughing once they got their hands on *Charmed Life*. "George, get your hands off—MUM!"

But George, who had no respect, yanked the magazine free. He held it aloft, triumphant, for everyone to see.

The Weasley boys looked. Their faces shifted from amusement to shock, and from shock to horrified disgust.

"You're joking—"

"No they didn't—"

"Not Malfoy—"

"I'll tear his head off—"

"Give me that!"

In seconds, the five of them were on their feet, huddled around the picture. Ginny heard the pages being turned, and then Bill was reading aloud.

"On February eleventh, after a long, hard shift on dragonback, Draco Malfoy, heir to the Malfoy fortune and employee of the Permanent Azkaban Patrol, landed his Chinese Fireball and began his second shift as broomback escort to the Minister's daughter. Virginia Weasley, whom the Ministry has recently discovered harbors rare Empathic gifts, has been spending her afternoons Healing the dragons. Draco Malfoy has spent his afternoons at her side, to protect her from the dragons' dangers while she works. It is common knowledge that the Ministry dragons have been experiencing difficulty and that the P.A.P. has been faulty since the start. But the diligence of Miss Weasley and Mr. Malfoy has paid off; in recent weeks there have been no accidents. The improved atmosphere may be due to Miss Weasley's extraordinary talents."

Bill paused. He seemed to be struggling with the next sentence.

"Or perhaps love is in the air."

"Oh *no*," Ginny put her face in her hands.

"Spring fever has finally come to Azkaban, and inspired a most unlikely pair of..." Bill stopped. "Of lovers. When the couple is not spooning in plain sight on the back of Malfoy's Firebolt 5, they must conduct their romance in secret, making use of dark pubs like the Leaping Fish, in Stornoway, to further their dark attraction..." Bill stopped again. "I can't read any more of this," he said.

There were more sounds of pages rustling as the magazine changed hands, and a long silence followed. Ginny listened to her heartbeat in her ears, and wondered what she'd done in her past lives to earn the scarlet reputation that the press was so eager to give her.

"I'LL KILL HIM!" Ron shouted presently.

"No, no, he didn't do it," Ginny said, rubbing her head. "Flummery did. Believe me, he won't like it any more than I do."

Charlie broke the huddle and held the magazine close to Ginny's face. "What," he demanded, "does this *mean*, Ginny?"

She couldn't answer. Her whole brain was taken up with watching the train-wreck spectacle of her hand reaching out to touch Draco's face... of Draco weeping openly... Draco taking her hand and pressing his mouth to her palm... the two of them leaning across the tiny table at the Leaping Fish to kiss in the sloppiest way...

Ginny giggled.

She didn't mean to do it, and all her brothers gasped when she did, but it was just too funny.

"Wow," she said, and giggled again. "Look at him crying. It wasn't like that at all. He's going to be so angry." She imagined Draco's face, when he saw this picture, and began to laugh in earnest. "I'm *not* looking forward to seeing him today," she said, and pushed the magazine back at Charlie. Feeling wide-awake and strangely entertained, Ginny turned back to munch on her toast.

"Seeing him?" Charlie threw up his hands. The magazine fluttered. "You're never going back there—you think I'm letting you *spoon* on *broomback* after reading—after *seeing*—"

"Oi, Charlie, give it a rest." Fred and George were quick to sit down and resume breakfast. "It's not like it's real, or anything."

"Fanks, Fred!" Ginny said through her toast.

"Or is it?" George asked, shooting her a mischievous grin. "Minister's Daughter Heals Malfoy Heir—is it her rare magic power, or is it something more?"

"Wait a minute." Ginny dropped her toast. "Did it... did it really say all that, about me being Empathic?"

George nodded.

"Oh no," Ginny wailed. "That was supposed to be a secret!"

"Why?" Fred looked unconcerned. "You'll be famous."

"Exactly. The last famous Healers got *killed*."

Fred and George stared at her.

"Bloody reporter!"

"Ugly old cow!"

"What were you doing in a pub with Malfoy?" Ron's voice was controlled, but his face was red. He sat down next to Ginny and waited.

"Not snogging him," Ginny snapped. "Pass the cream."

"I know you weren't. I know you wouldn't." Ron snorted. "It's—I mean, it's obviously a fake, isn't it, look at your face. It's distorted."

"Also, I don't drool like an animal when I kiss," Ginny said, and giggled again when all her brothers were struck momentarily silent.

"But you were... in that pub with him," Ron said finally.

"Yes."

Ron looked at his plate. "All right ... and what were you doing there?"

"Look, if you want to interrogate people, go to work. I don't have to answer you."

Ron gave her a sharp look. "I have good reasons to suspect him, even if he seems to be working like everyone else. You shouldn't be alone with him, no matter what."

She shouldn't be alone, she shouldn't be working on dragons, she shouldn't be honing her skills—Ginny wished she'd put a sausage on her plate earlier. She wanted to spear something with a fork. "I'm not stupid, you know. I know Malfoy just as well as you do, I know all the reasons not to trust him, and—"

"No you don't." Ron took a deep breath and let it out. "And I can't tell you yet. I'm just telling you that you shouldn't put yourself in any more danger than you already have. Don't be alone with him, Ginny. For... for whatever reason." Ron gave her an unsettling, sidelong look. "What was the reason?"

Ginny tossed her head and said nothing. She felt their eyes on her and knew she was only making them more suspicious, but she didn't want them to know she'd been working on Malfoy. If they found out, then Remus would find out, and he'd lecture her, and... Ginny sighed. Remus was going to find out anyway.

"I was working on him, all right?" she said. "That's all."

"Healing him?" Bill asked. He pulled the magazine out of Charlie's clenched hands, and sat down.

"Yes. Because I was finding it hard to be near him and work on the dragons at the same time."

"He *let* you work on him?"

Ginny shrugged. "I told him I needed the practice."

"And he agreed to help you?" Bill looked surprised. "That doesn't sound like Malfoy."

"It isn't. He did it to annoy Harry."

"Ah." Bill sat back. "So what happened? What'd you feel?"

Ginny shook her head. "That's his business. I've been thinking about what you said about ethics, and I've done some research. Other medical professionals take patient confidentiality oaths, so I took one of my own."

"What, just in your head?"

Ginny nodded. "Yes, I trust myself."

Bill looked disappointed but impressed. "Fair enough."

"Harry knows, then?" Ron glanced at her. "About you in the pub with Malfoy alone and everyth—"

"Harry knows," Ginny said shortly. She didn't want to think about what Harry might do, when he saw this. He had hardly looked at her since she had visited the Notch last week, and she had a bad feeling that this issue of *Charmed Life* would only make the tension between them worse.

She could still feel Charlie hovering behind her. It was starting to get on her nerves. "Look, would you sit *down*?" she nearly shouted. "The picture's a fake, I'm going back to work this afternoon, you *need* me up there, I'm eighteen in two weeks, I'm not in nappies, and I'm sick to death of your attitude!" She looked over her shoulder and up at her brother, and was satisfied to see Charlie's mouth hanging open. "Well?" she said. "It hurts my feelings, the way you've been acting. And it makes Harry feel like he's got a right to act like a prat."

Charlie's face darkened. "Has Harry been a prat to you?"

Ginny sighed. "Oh, Charlie." She turned a bit in her chair, and gave him a friendly punch in the stomach. "Lighten up."

Charlie rubbed his stomach and sat down.

"What's with all the shouting?" Adam raced into the kitchen and straight to Bill's side. "Molly wants to know. Also, she's ready for boxes, we've finished in the attic—say, what's *this*?"

And to Ginny's horror, Adam snatched *Charmed Life* from the table, looking like his birthday had come early. He still hadn't forgiven her for Christmas.

"Woo woo!" he cried, darting away when Bill made a grab for him. "Has your mum seen this?" Laughing hard, he pointed at Ginny, then deliberately misread the caption below the offending photograph. "Is it her rare magic power—or is it her *tongue*?"

"ADAM!" shouted all the boys together, except for Ron, who snickered, despite the disgusted look on his face.

But Adam was gone. "MOLLY!" he called, as he pounded up the stairs. "MOLLY, GINNY'S IN TROUBLE!"

"He sounds like *you*," Ron said, still snickering at Ginny. "Muumum, look what Ron's done to the

carpet... Muuum, Ron's hurting me..." He elbowed her. "This is the best birthday gift of all. Seems you're not the baby anymore."

"Oh yes I am," said Ginny, suddenly defensive of her title. "Tell him, Charlie."

But Charlie didn't have a chance.

"VIRGINIA MARY WEASLEY!"

The Burrow shook with their mother's magically amplified voice. Six Weasley children covered their ears.

"You're done for," said Fred.

"Nice knowing you," said George.

"COME HERE NOW!"

* * * * *

Ginny was glad to get outside and go to work. It wasn't cold anymore; rather the air was cool and soft and she shut her eyes to enjoy the smell of the sea before venturing into the dragon camp. She didn't want to explain that picture again. She hoped no one here would ask any questions, though she supposed she didn't have to answer them if they did. There were only a few people who deserved answers. Her mother had demanded a full explanation, but had taken it pretty well, all things considered, and after the first few minutes of shock, her brothers had been great all day. Ron's birthday lunch had been really pleasant, and Charlie had even apologized to her.

Ginny wasn't sure if everyone else would be willing to let the subject drop. Draco wouldn't ask questions, of course, because he knew the truth first hand, and Ginny assumed that he would avoid the topic at all costs. And if Harry even dared to ask questions then he was going to find himself in a lot of trouble. Remus was the only person she was afraid to face.

Ginny strode between the two giant rocks that were the entry to the invisible world of dragons. She put on her gear and went straight to Mordor, whose turn it was to be worked on, and she was relieved to see Draco waiting there as usual. She had rather wondered if he would show up today.

"Oh good. You're here."

"Here," he snarled, "and on every breakfast table in the country."

Ginny blinked. She'd been wrong; he wasn't going to avoid it. He took a step closer to her.

"Was this part of your *experiment*?"

"Oh yes." She rolled her eyes and stood her ground. "I was so hoping this would happen. My whole family's just as pleased as can be."

He gave her a look of disgust and crossed his arms. "They could not have been more displeased than..." Draco stopped and turned away. "It's been taken care of."

Ginny wasn't sure what he meant, but she knew it couldn't be good. Perhaps he'd had the reporters taken off and tortured—she certainly wouldn't have put it past him. But then she remembered what Ron had said once, about those reporters having been on the Malfoys' payroll, and she narrowed her eyes.

"It's your own fault, isn't it, if this happened?" She glared at him. "Those reporters have been on the spot for some incredible stories, haven't they? Got yourself to blame, haven't you, if it's come round to smack you in the arse?"

Draco looked so angry that Ginny thought he might strike her. "You," he hissed, "have no idea what you're saying, Weasley. And you have *no* understanding of what it means that every family in Britain has a picture of *me* kissing a—a—"

"Pureblood?" She couldn't help it.

Draco went whiter than usual, but to Ginny's surprise, he made no retort. He pulled on his gloves, Summoned his broom, and mounted it. "My dragon won't pay for your cheek," he spat, and though he was obviously furious, he moved back to make room for her. "Enough time has been wasted. Get on."

Ginny did. But the satisfaction she usually reaped from turning Mordor's cold knots into warm, smooth energy was less than usual, and she was very glad when they were done. She was glad that the dragons hardly seemed to need her anymore—even Norbert's aura was almost clean again. Perhaps she wouldn't have to do this for much longer. It was worse than ever to be near Draco, and she wished that she could work on him again. But he had never spoken of the pub, until today, and she knew that, thanks to *Charmed Life*, he probably never would.

"Are you for *hire*, Weasley?" he asked softly and suddenly, just behind her ear. Ginny jumped. Was he making a reference to the picture? Was he calling her a—

"What does that mean?" she asked coldly. "If it's what I think, then you'd better just land."

He laughed. "I'm not calling you a harlot. My god, do you honestly think I'd solicit *you* for that type of service?"

"That's it." Ginny put her wand away. "Land. You can't harass me, you signed a contract."

"My shift is over, in any case," he said, and took them gracefully to the ground. "And I was only asking if you wanted to earn a wage as a proper *human* Healer." He waited for her to step off the broom, and then dismounted. "*You* misinterpreted. Wishful thinking, perhaps."

Ginny gave him a foul look, then remembered that ridiculous image of the two of them in the Leaping Fish, salivating all over each other. Draco probably *did* kiss like that. She laughed, and he started.

"That wasn't a *joke*."

"I know."

His jaw tightened. "I have... a use for your services."

Ginny watched him carefully. Was this for him? His mother? She couldn't yet work it out. "All right," she said, and waited.

He removed his gloves with unnecessary force. "Don't you even care to know what I'm asking of you?"

"Yes. Go on."

He visibly ground his teeth for a moment. "I know what Empaths are capable of," he said. "I will *employ* you—" and it sounded as if he enjoyed saying so, "—in your capacity as a Healer. On conditions of complete confidentiality." He took a menacing step towards her. "Don't think I can't make you regret a loose tongue, Weasley. No matter the pretensions to power that may have seized your delusional family, I can and will make you regret a breach of contract."

Ginny knew her mouth was open, but it took her a moment to close it. He was letting her try it again. She must have got through to him, the first time. And she really did want to practice, no matter what Ron had said about being alone with Draco. Whatever his reasons, they couldn't have been too bad if he wouldn't even tell her. "All right," she said, when she remembered to answer. "Where do you want to go?"

"You will attend me at my estate," he said. "Be at Malfoy Manor on Saturday, at ten o'clock."

Malfoy Manor. Ginny felt suddenly quite cold. "Be at—where?" she asked, and her voice sounded small to her ears.

Draco smiled—a slow smile, full of enjoyment. "Malfoy Manor, Weasley. You will attend on me there."

"I have another obligation on Saturdays."

Draco shrugged. "Consult your schedule, then. I'm certainly in no hurry." He was lying, and she could feel it. But he turned and walked towards the equipment tent without another word.

Ginny was so absorbed in her thoughts, and in watching the back of Draco's pale, unfathomable head as he sauntered away, that she almost missed seeing Harry. He stood several yards off, wand in hand, and had already changed his clothes. He looked terribly, terribly tired.

Ginny fixed her eyes on him, unsure of what he was feeling. But if the look in his eyes was any indication, then she was fairly certain that she didn't want to know.

Harry ran his eyes over her and returned them to her face. Without a word, he Disapparated.

Stung more deeply than if he had slapped her, Ginny stared at the empty space where he had been, and told herself that he hadn't just done that. He hadn't been there; she'd only imagined it. He hadn't hurt her on purpose.

But he had.

Ginny changed out of her gear. She walked between the giant stones and back out to the empty, silent beach. She sat on the rocks and stared at the sea for a long time, watching it roll and crash, thinking back over her life since Harry had come into it. How rich he had made it. How terribly confusing.

How could he not trust her?

Ginny wrapped her arms around her legs, laid her cheek on her knees, and shut her eyes, listening to the ocean. She'd stood with him at crucial moments. She would have died for him. He knew it. How could he even *think* that she would be inconstant? She rocked herself, feeling the wind on her face, reliving for the thousandth time her first glimpse of the boy who had stolen her heart on platform nine and three-quarters. She loved him. Openly and totally. With a force that was sometimes humiliating. And she would always love him like that.

Perhaps it was time to accept that, no matter how far it seemed to have come between them, Harry did not love her back. Not with any real faith or strength. Not like she loved him.

Ginny hugged her legs and let her mouth fall open. She felt a strange, sad sound escape her,

but it was carried away on a wind and never reached her ears.

* * * * *

Harry waited in the front room of Lupin Lodge for a long time, *Charmed Life* clutched in both hands. Remus walked into the room at one point, glanced at what Harry was holding, and walked back out again. Sirius came in a moment later.

"Waiting for Ginny?" he asked quietly from the doorway. He folded his arms. "Harry?"

Harry didn't answer.

"She'll have had a long day when she gets here."

Harry turned enough so that he could only see Sirius out of the corner of his eye. He felt absolutely rigid; there was nothing that Sirius could say to ease it and he wanted to be left the hell alone.

"That's all I'm going to say. For now." Sirius paused. "No, I lied. I have no place—*no* place giving this kind of advice—but go home and think about this before you start it. Don't say anything until you've thought about it good and hard. You'll regret it. Believe me."

Harry bent the magazine in his fists and focused on the mantelpiece. Fairy lights wreathed the fireplace. Ginny had put them there. He'd watched her do it, and she'd been laughing, shooting him looks over her shoulder from across the room. Looks just like the one she was giving Draco Malfoy on the cover of this issue of *Charmed Life*.

Harry looked down at the carpet.

"All right, Harry. Do what you like."

Harry heard his godfather leave the room. He heard Sirius and Remus gather their cloaks and leave the house. The door shut softly behind them and left Harry in solitude and silence.

He didn't know how much longer he sat there. The wait felt both endless and brief, and in it Harry's insides churned, cold and heavy. The picture wasn't real. Couldn't be real. He knew that. But it *looked* real. And did he know her, really? He had thought so... but she was still making private dates with Malfoy. And there was still one, nagging question. The one he couldn't ask.

A soft *pop!* sent a chill coursing through him. He didn't look up.

"Harry?"

Ginny's voice was close. Without having to look, Harry knew that she was right behind him, at the foot of the stairs. He heard her put her bag on the floor and throw her cloak on the chair beside his, but he turned his face further away and saw only flames, leaping in the fireplace.

"Haven't seen you at all this week. Come to say hello?"

Harry waited for her to drop the sarcasm. He wasn't in the mood.

"Something *wrong?*"

The quiet precision of her voice suggested that she knew exactly what was wrong, and Harry hated that she wouldn't come right out and say it. Was she playing with him? He unrolled the magazine in his hands and glanced down at its cover. Without turning to face her, he held up his copy of *Charmed Life* so that she could see the picture over his shoulder.

The room was very still.

"Yes, I've seen it." Ginny's voice was quiet. "Draco's sorry he ever hired those reporters, I'm sure."

"Oh, it's *Draco* now?" The words tore out of Harry like bullets and he brought his arm down hard, smacking the magazine on the arm of his chair.

There was another awful pause.

"I think that's always been his name." Ginny sounded aloof. Disinterested. "Any more questions?"

Harry couldn't believe that she wasn't denying it. He jostled the magazine. "Did this happen?" he demanded, and made the mistake of glancing at the picture again. Ginny's fingers stroked Malfoy's cheek. Malfoy had his mouth on her hand. He wanted to tear Malfoy's face off and feed it to Norbert; he wanted to *hurt* him.

"Turn around." Ginny's voice was strangely distant. "You look at me and ask me that."

Harry didn't want to do it, but he stood. He'd been in the same position for so long that his back hurt, and he put his free hand to it. With the other he shook the magazine again. "Did it happen," he repeated flatly, and crumpled the picture hard. He wanted to disfigure that cover so that he couldn't recognize the people on it—he didn't even want to *touch* it—disgust surged through Harry and he pitched *Charmed Life* into the fire. Its glossy pages sizzled and it sent a nasty scorching smell into the room.

"Turn around."

Very reluctantly, Harry turned and caught sight of Ginny. One look at her told him that she was not the same girl from the cover of the magazine: her hair was limp, her face was damp as if she'd been sweating, and her eyes were dark and hurt and angry. He could hear her breathing. He could see the tension in her jaw. She was real, and in comparison the picture in the paper suddenly looked like plastic.

Ginny stared at Harry as if she had never fully seen him. "Do you... really need me to answer?"

Harry knew that he didn't. But he shrugged and waited.

"You're serious?"

He glanced away from her and fixed his eyes on the chair where she'd thrown her cloak, not sure what he was driving at. He was infuriating her, he knew that much. And he knew there was no reason for it. But he couldn't stop himself—there was something that had to come out of him, something that had been twisting inside him for longer than he could remember, and it was coming out *tonight*.

"How can you *ask* me that?"

Harry wasn't even sure what the conversation was about anymore. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his robes. Coming out of the pocket of Ginny's discarded cloak was an identification badge, which bore the symbol of St. Mungo's. She'd been working with Hermione's parents. She'd been working with the dragons. She'd been working on Malfoy. And now he knew she had homework to finish; her rucksack was overstuffed with schoolbooks.

"Harry, we were *in* a picture like that. You and I. And do you honestly think I'd..." She laughed, sounding slightly unhinged. "Have you really been sitting here wondering if I've been off snogging Malfoy in pubs? Yes, Harry. That's exactly it. I've been having it off with *Draco* and we're going to be married next Tuesday—sorry I didn't get a chance to tell you before, but you know how it is when one's a busy little tart, there's just no *time* for explanations."

Harry shuddered and gave her a swift, hard look. "Don't talk like that."

"Like what? That's what you're calling me, you're just not saying the words out loud—don't you *know* me, Harry?" Ginny searched his face. "Don't you know me at all?"

Harry braced himself, and said the truth. "I'm not sure."

He couldn't remember a silence feeling quite like this one. It hurt to stand in it. It was actually painful to watch Ginny's face as it went from pleading to shocked... to ghostly.

"What?" she whispered. For a long time, it seemed to be all that she could say. She looked afraid. "What do you mean?"

He had to ask her. It had been weighing on him for months, and this was as good a time as any other—even better, really, since she was already furious. It might as well be now. "You're a Healer," he said. "You've been one all your life even if you didn't know it and you've also..." He couldn't say it.

"Yes?" Ginny asked faintly.

"You've... liked me." Harry couldn't put it in stronger terms, and he really couldn't look at her now. "From erm. From when you were pretty little." He could hardly hear himself. He knew he was mumbling. "So I've been wondering how much of it...you know, because of the Healing..." Harry stopped. It was too hard.

When Ginny spoke, he could not read her tone. "I'm sorry, but whatever you're saying there, you're going to have to come right out and say it."

Harry could feel himself burning up. "You... don't you know what I'm saying?"

But this time it was Ginny who didn't answer, and Harry felt suddenly stranded. He hadn't realized how much he had come to depend on the fact that she already knew him all the way to his bones—and she did. It spared him having to be this person that he wasn't—this person with emotional things to say and relationship hurdles to clear—he simply didn't know how. He'd never had any practice. It was different for Ron, who had lived all his life in a house where people said what they were feeling and then hugged and made up and went on living. It was different for all of them. None of them knew what it was like to be this trapped, and Harry found himself wanting to lash out at the lot of them.

But it was Ginny he had in the room.

"All right then," he said angrily. "You want me to say it right out?"

Ginny gazed at him and raised her chin.

"Your book says that Healers can spend their whole lives devoted to people who are full of serious pain, and never realize that the only reason they're *really* devoted to the person is because they're Healers." Harry's chest rose and fell rapidly, and he felt his control sliding further out of his reach with every second. "So what I want to know is, have you fancied me your whole life because of *me*,

or because of some magic?"

Ginny flinched as if he'd struck her. If she had been pale before, she was stark white now, and her hands clenched at her sides. She opened her mouth and closed it, then did it again. Her chest hitched.

"Well?" Harry nearly shouted, when a minute had passed and she still hadn't answered. He'd just asked her the hardest question he'd ever asked anyone—was she just going to stand there? "You told me to say it—can't you say anything back?"

"I..." Ginny looked stunned. "Harry."

"Yeah?"

"I never fancied you."

Harry barked a harsh laugh before he could stop himself. He realized at once that it was unkind, but it was too late. The color rushed back into Ginny's face.

"Are you... *laughing* at me?" she managed. Her voice shook. "Because I'm telling the truth—I never fancied you, I never *liked* you, who do you think I am? I *loved* you, Harry."

Harry jumped.

"I still love you." She didn't seem to know what to do with her hands. "And you think it's magic?"

"Do you even know?" Harry demanded, hurrying to block out the frightening force of the words she'd just said. "It could be, couldn't it? You don't know, you haven't worked everything out with your powers, have you?"

She stared at him. "Haven't I been obvious enough about you?"

The right answer was yes, and Harry knew it, but it wasn't the answer he felt. "So? You might be drawn to me for the same reasons you're drawn to Malfoy—or anyone. How can you really *tell*?"

Ginny found places for her hands—one she pressed to her stomach and the other to her heart. "For the same reasons I'm drawn... to Malfoy?" she whispered. "Is that some kind of joke?" She looked right at him, obviously incredulous. "Is it really this hard for you to believe that I might just love you?"

Harry made an angry noise, and wished he had something to throw. She was missing the point. "Why can't you just answer the damn question?"

"I *did*." Ginny didn't look away. "I don't know what I can say. I don't know why words should make a difference. I *know* you. I was there with you, for Voldemort. I would have—" She stopped short, but Harry knew what she had been about to say.

I would have died for you.

"That's not the *same*!" The words tore out of Harry, and he didn't even know what they meant. "It's not about Voldemort, it's not about spells—I'm not talking about *Expecto Sacrificum*—you weren't the only one in that, that was Ron and Hermione and Remus and Sirius, that was necessary, that wasn't for *me*—that just happened to *be* me, it could have been anyone with the same—born in the same—anyone could have been Harry Potter. I don't make that difference."

Harry's head pounded. His heart raced. He didn't know what he was saying and it didn't matter, it all had to get said, here and now, though Ginny was gaping him in unconcealed astonishment.

"Dying for me," he spat. "What the hell good is that going to do me—my mum and dad died for me and if I could have had them back and forgot Hogwarts and gone to Dudley's bloody school I would have done it—I lived in a cupboard, for God's sake, and you don't know what that's like, you can't *know*—"

He was panting now. Beyond his own control. Humiliating words spilled out of him, unstoppable. The dam had burst.

"They didn't even know if I was *worth* dying for, did they? I was just a baby, I could have turned out a thief or a murderer or something—and I did, I've killed people, I've *killed* people. Doesn't matter who they were, I did it, didn't I? And I got people killed, *good* people who weren't supposed to die, and where were the big clever spells to protect *them*? Why was it so important that *I* get through all of it? I was supposed to die a hundred times, and there's a good chance that if I *had* other people would have made it."

Harry put his hands up to his face. He didn't know what was happening to him. He was shaking all over, his breath coming in gasps, and his glasses—he didn't want them. He didn't want to see her anymore, standing there with her mouth open, watching him fall apart. He tore the glasses off his face and dangled them at his side, keeping his other hand over his eyes.

"You've got no reason to care about me. I can't be like you. I'm sick of being sacrificed for, so don't give this to me, whatever it is. I don't want it. I don't *want* it." Harry kept his eyes hidden. Tight, angry blackness was unraveling in his chest and he ached. He pressed his hand closer to his face, afraid that if he relieved the pressure something would happen that he could never forgive

himself for.

"You don't want it?" Ginny asked, so quietly that he could barely hear her. "You don't want me caring about you?"

Harry couldn't move. Every embarrassing thing he'd just said echoed in his head, making him dizzy. He thought he might be sick.

"I'm always going to care about you."

"Well *stop it*," he managed.

"I can't. You can't choose that for me. That's not a sacrifice for me. And even if it was, I'd make it anyway."

Harry shoved his glasses in his pocket. He needed both hands to cover his face. He never wanted her to see him again. He'd never lost control like that, and he never wanted to lose control like that again—and Ginny was the only person in the world that could drive him to it.

"You need to quit your job," she said, still very quietly. "You can't be around those Dementors anymore, Harry. I mean it."

"You think this is because of the *Dementors*?" His voice was rough. Harsh. He took his hands down and focused on the blur of her. He was going to lose his balance. Harry fumbled to pull his glasses out of his pocket and put them back on his face, wishing as soon as he'd done so that he had left her blurry and unrecognizable. Her face was full of worry, hurt and love.

"I don't think they're helping," she said, and came towards him. "I think you need a break."

"I'll tell you what I need a *break* from," said Harry, reaching for something he could understand. He couldn't let himself spiral back down into the place where he'd just been, and he had to get out of here. Now. "You on that broom with *Malfoy*."

Ginny hesitated, then reached up and pushed his hair gently away from his forehead. Harry shut his eyes and felt her fingers, cool on his hot, sweaty skin. He was being horrible to her. Horrible. But the black knot in his chest wasn't half-gone—it lingered and made him feel ill. There was more to say. He dropped his head, and his forehead touched her shoulder.

"Ginny." It was all the apology he could manage.

"You know I've never touched *Malfoy*."

He nodded into her shoulder.

"And you know I love you."

He didn't nod, or move from his slumped position. He touched the outside of her arm and dragged his fingers haphazardly to her wrist.

"You do know that, don't you?"

But the truth was that he didn't. He knew that she meant whatever she was saying, but he had no idea what it really meant to be loved like she loved him. It wasn't like friendship—Ron and Hermione weren't going anywhere, not if they hadn't gone already. But Ginny was something apart from that, and it frightened him to believe in her kind of love because she had the power to take it away. She could die. She could be killed. She could leave. She could decide he wasn't all he was cracked up to be. He already knew that he wasn't.

"Didn't you save my life?" she whispered, and put her arms around his neck. "Harry, listen to me, I *love* you."

More than anything he wanted to allow it in. As much happiness as she'd given him, he had never allowed her in—not far. Not this far. He knew it was what she wanted—or what she *said* she wanted—but he didn't reach to hold her back. Whatever she was offering, it was stronger than he was; if it came into him and then left, it would kill him.

Ginny held him against her for a long time, her hands soft on his back. She didn't seem to care that he was unresponsive. When she pulled away, she softly kissed his cheek... the corner of his mouth... the side of his neck... And then she sniffled and took a step back, separating herself from him.

Harry focused on her face and a nasty chill ran through him.

She was crying.

"I think we need to take a break," she managed. "From each other. Because I know exactly how I feel and it's too hard, knowing that you don't."

Harry couldn't breathe.

"I do love you—but it's... it's all right if you don't love me, Harry." She smiled weakly through her tears, and touched the front of his jumper. "I always knew it was a long shot. I know you care about me. I know we're friends. And I'll always be glad we had... something."

He had no idea how to answer.

"Just... when you've sorted out how you *do* feel..." She took her hand off his jumper and swiped

at her eyes. "Let me know, all right?"

She turned away at once, still swiping at her cheeks. Harry stood in shock as Ginny collected her cloak and bag from the chair, and walked up the stairs to her room.

Her door clicked shut. There was a thud, as if she'd dropped her bag to the ground. Harry stood and listened, unable to move or think, until there was a creak of bedsprings and a low, anguished moan that he didn't want to identify.

Slam.

Harry spun towards the front hall. No. Sirius and Remus. He couldn't face them, he didn't want questions. Especially not when he could hear Sirius almost right away.

"Wait. I'll check and see if Harry's still—"

But Harry didn't wait to be found. He pulled his wand, gathered the only shred of concentration that remained to him, and got out.

— CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX —

Hard Truths

When a week had passed and Harry and Ginny still had not spoken Ron informed Hermione that something had to be done. Hermione laughed and reminded Ron that *they* had once gone three months without speaking because of a cat and a rat. Fights were natural, and Harry and Ginny were new to being a couple, and they'd work it out on their own without any interference.

But when another week passed and Ginny's birthday arrived without any sign that Harry knew or cared, Hermione began to wonder if she should interfere after all.

Ginny had grown steadily quieter each day as she'd continued to work on Hermione's parents. She was now able to stay near the Grangers for more than an hour at a time, and she went to St. Mungo's every evening when she was finished with school and the dragons, ignoring anyone who told her that she didn't really have space for it in her schedule. Hermione wondered if Ginny was really dedicated to her work, or if she simply wanted to distract herself.

"I don't think you should be working on your birthday," Hermione ventured. "Don't you want to go back and see if—"

"It doesn't matter," Ginny said, her hands extended over Hermione's father's knees. "Don't worry about it." But her voice was too quiet and her shoulders were slumped. "I'm fine."

Hermione crossed her legs and her arms in one motion. "You and Harry are so much alike," she began, but stopped when Ginny dropped her hands and looked up.

"*Please* don't." She didn't move again until Hermione had nodded assent, and then she lifted her hands again and returned her eyes to Mr. Granger. "I have to tell you something about your parents. This isn't going to be easy."

Hermione steeled herself. "Go on."

"The higher I get, the more damage there is. Which makes sense, if the curses were primarily aimed at their chests and heads."

"I... assumed as much." But that didn't make it any easier to hear. Hermione clasped her hands on her knee and watched Ginny move her fingers slowly and deliberately in the air. "Is any of it—can any of it be Healed?"

"Yes. But your dad..." Ginny passed her fingers over Hermione's father's eyes, and her face clouded. "Hermione..."

"Just tell me." Hermione tried to keep the edges out of her voice. "Say it, I need to know."

Ginny dropped her hands and shook her head. "I don't know how to break this kind of news," she muttered. "I don't know how mediwizards do this. I'm sorry."

"Say it fast. The waiting is worse."

Ginny met Hermione's eyes and took a breath. "I think your father is blind."

Hermione gripped the arms of her chair and didn't answer for a moment. She wasn't sure how to process what she was being told. "Okay," she finally said. But it wasn't all right. It was sickening. It wasn't fair, it wasn't fair—

"I could be wrong."

"But you think you're right." The world around Hermione was blurry, and she knew there were tears in her eyes, though she couldn't really feel them. She knew she would be lucky if her father woke up at *all*. But if he was going to wake up blind... and there was no one left to blame. No one to strike at.

Ginny came around the bed, looking distraught. She knelt in front of Hermione and put a hand on her knee. "I hate telling you these things," she said quietly. "I'm going to do everything in my power to fix it, you know I am."

"Of course I know." She paused, not trusting her voice. "Is—is my mum..."

"I don't think so. She seems to have much less damage to her head and face." Ginny was quiet for a moment. "I expect... I expect your dad stood in front of her."

"Yes," Hermione whispered. "I'm sure he did." She swiftly blocked a mental image, not wanting to imagine how it must have happened. She had always tried not to dwell on it, not to think of all the possible, morbid scenarios—and now she tried very hard to hold back her tears. She didn't want to make Ginny feel worse than she probably already did. Delia had warned her not to pressure Ginny, who was doing more than she should have for the Grangers. It was taking time away from her studies and it was straining her relationship with Remus, who was now adamant that she should give up several of her extracurricular activities and focus on finishing her seventh year. But Ginny had been just as adamant. Hermione had heard the fight from upstairs. Ginny had shouted that she would fail out of school rather than give up Healing, if those were her choices, and then she had left the house in tears.

But Hermione knew it had much less to do with Remus, or Healing, than it had to do with Harry. Fortunately, Remus knew it too. They all did. Except Harry.

"You really shouldn't be working on your birthday," Hermione said again, when she had mastered her emotions. "Let's go home and get ready for the party." The change of subject was half for Ginny's sake and half for her own; she wanted to get out of St. Mungo's and find Ron and be held for a while before she had to put on a brave face.

She imagined that Ginny needed a little holding too—her face was very pale and there were rings under her eyes. The Weasleys were meeting at the Snout's Fair to celebrate Ginny's and Ron's birthdays together, and Hermione could predict Mrs. Weasley's reaction if she should see Ginny looking so worn out.

"I don't have the energy for a party," Ginny said, and stood.

"You're coming to your birthday," Hermione told her. "If I have to drag you. If you need to lie down first, then go and do it. Besides, it's for Ron's birthday too, and he'll want you there."

Ginny shrugged. "All right."

Hermione paused, unsure of whether to say what was on the tip of her tongue. "And I'm sure Harry will want—"

Ginny winced. "No, don't." She peeled off the white mediwizarding coat she'd been issued, and draped it over her arm. "But you're right, I need a shower and a nap. I'll feel better when I don't smell like dragons and hospitals. See you tonight."

Hermione followed her into the corridor, but Ginny was walking very fast and obviously wanted to be left alone.

Shifting from one foot to the other, Hermione tried to stop herself from carrying out the thought in her head. *They can handle it alone*, she thought to herself. *I told Ron we should stay out of it and I still think we should stay out of it...*

She checked her watch. Half past four. There really was no point going straight home to Lupin Lodge—Ginny would be in the shower and didn't feel like talking anyway. If she happened to Apparate to the Notch in hopes that Ron might leave work early, and if Harry just happened to be there, well, he was her friend, wasn't he? And he needed someone to talk to just as much as Ginny did—if she could even convince him to talk. She had failed with Ginny.

But she knew Harry better. Hermione drew her wand and Apparated into the front room of the Notch.

"Hey! Heard of knocking?" The voice came from the couch, where Harry was sitting, still in dragon gear. He held an odd-looking and colorful package on his knee, and it contrasted with the grim expression on his face.

"Sorry," Hermione said. "Mind if I sit here?" Without waiting for an answer, she sat on the opposite end of the couch, pulled a leg under her and faced Harry, who continued to look ahead.

"Ron's not home," he said.

Hermione shrugged. "Well, maybe I just came to see you."

Harry let out a short laugh. "Right," he said, still not looking at her.

Hermione felt something snap inside her. She knew that he felt closer to Ron than to her in many ways, and she'd come to terms with it. And perhaps it was strange for him to see her and Ron really together now, in the way that they were. But she and Harry had shared so much together—didn't it count for something?

"Don't you dare try that stuff with me," she said angrily. "Are you suggesting I've never taken an interest in you personally? Perhaps I'm not Ron, but you don't have to act so surprised if I decide I want to come over and chat for a bit in the afternoon."

"You haven't in a while."

Hermione was surprised. "I was trying to mind my own business," she said honestly. "I thought you'd be pleased."

Harry was silent.

"Well if you want me here, I'm here, so talk to me. I never see you anymore. You're always asleep, or out walking about, or working, or reading..." She smiled. "Not that I mind the reading part—it makes me happy to see you pick up a book—but I don't even feel like I know what's going on with you anymore, and I used to know pretty much... everything."

He glanced at her. "I'm sure Ginny's told you."

"Ginny won't tell me anything. When I asked if you'd had a row, she only said that it wasn't a row. I asked what it was and she said she didn't know." Hermione watched Harry's eyes flit down to the package on his knee. He looked uncomfortable. "If it wasn't a row, then what was it?" she prompted.

Harry traced a finger along the side of the funny-looking package. "We're... taking a break from each other," he mumbled.

Hermione felt a stab of worry. They'd broken it off. "Why?"

"Ginny said we should."

"Why?" she asked again, not sure she believed him. That Ginny would voluntarily choose to take a break from Harry didn't seem quite right. There had to be more to it.

Harry wasn't offering any further information.

"For no reason?" Hermione pressed.

He shrugged as if to say he didn't know, and Hermione crossed her arms. He knew—he was just being stubborn. She was about to interrogate him further when he lifted the package off of his knee and put it on the couch between them.

"I'm sorry I haven't been around," he said, pushing up his glasses with one finger. Hermione noticed that they were smudged—and his hair was a mess, and he looked rather lost. She felt as though they were back at Hogwarts, and she was about to help Harry with a particularly difficult spell. "I've just been... busy. You know. I know you have too, with your parents and Culparrat stuff, and... stuff."

Hermione had to smile a little. For such an acutely observant person, Harry could be very unaware. "Yes, there's a lot going on," she said, deciding not to tell him about her father until things were all sorted out. He'd only blame himself for that too, and she was glad to have something else to concentrate on, for the moment. "I've been spending some time with Sirius as well."

Harry looked interested. "I've hardly seen him lately. Are you helping him with research?"

"No—he thinks that the spell that I developed for my parents might help destroy the Dementors. So I gave him a copy of the spell to work with, and he's been muttering over it for the last two weeks."

"Good," Harry said, with surprising vehemence. "When will it be ready?"

Hermione looked closely at him, surprised by his eagerness. She supposed she shouldn't be—of course Harry wanted the Dementors destroyed; he worked with them every day, and if his appearance was anything to go by, they were certainly wearing away at him. He still had white hairs, which disturbed her very much.

Harry waited for her answer.

"I... don't even know if it will work," she said gently. "I've Thought on it, but like any spell, it would need to be tested on a small scale until it's perfected. And I can't think of anything to use as a test that would be equivalent to a Dementor."

"What about a Dementor itself? Is it something I can test for you while I'm at work?"

"No!" Hermione said, shocked. "You sound like Sirius. Of course a Dementor would be the best thing to use for a test, but the principle of the spell I've thought up is for it to be massive enough to destroy all of the Dementors at once. I think that's how it would have to be done. Because we know they can rejuvenate each other. I can't quite figure out how to condense it and still get it to work, so I don't think it's a good idea to rush out to test anything yet."

"A Boggart then."

Hermione shook her head. "The properties of a Boggart are entirely different. *Riddikulus* is one thing, but this would work on the actual physical *being* of the Dementor, and that can't be tested on another creature."

"Are you sure?" Harry was starting to look like himself again. Interested. Focused. "What does the spell do, exactly? What happens to the Dementor?"

"There's no way to tell. What we'd hope, actually, is that the souls would return to their owners. If their bodies are still alive, that is. I don't know what would happen to the dead ones. It could be

destructive—it's definitely dangerous, and it's still too early."

Harry frowned. "But aren't most of the soul-sucked people..."

"Criminals, yes. Or supposed criminals."

"You don't think the souls could really be put *back*?"

Hermione shrugged. "Sirius suggested it was a possibility. I think he's taking things a bit far. But we won't know unless we try, I suppose."

"Then why not let me try it?"

"Because there's nothing to try." Hermione gave him a very serious look. "I'm telling you, Harry, if you do anything stupid and get your soul sucked after everything we've come through, I'll kill you."

"Is that what would happen?" Harry asked, looking startled.

"If something goes wrong with a spell that affects their physical form? I don't know what would happen—they might retaliate, they've been out there without food for so long that they must be starving."

"They are," Harry said grimly.

"Well then wait until I have a chance to work it out—and I'll do it as soon as I can. *Don't* let Sirius go out there to do any experiments."

"All right," Harry promised. "I won't." There was an awkward silence.

"What's that?" Hermione asked, pointing to the package that sat between them. It was tall, conical, wrapped in purple, and very glittery, and it reminded her of something that Gilderoy Lockhart would have liked. Several brightly-colored ribbons stuck out at playful angles from the top, and Harry reached out to bat them back and forth with his fingers.

"This?" he asked. "It's, er... it's a present. For Ron, you know, for his birthday."

"Ron's birthday was two weeks ago and you gave him a Sneakoscope. Which I still don't understand."

Harry looked at her as though she wasn't too bright after all. "He's never had a really good one," he said. "And it might help him decide who's innocent—you know, in court."

"Those aren't allowed in court!"

Harry rolled his eyes.

"And *this* present isn't for Ron." Hermione went on, ignoring him and tapping the conical thing. "Purple isn't really his color, and quite honestly, if you gave him something covered with glitter, I'm not sure he'd ever speak to you again."

Harry reddened. "We're celebrating his birthday tonight, though, aren't we? At the Snout's Fair?" Hermione narrowed her eyes.

"It's for Ginny, all right?" Harry gave the ribbons another fierce bat. "But I'm not sure I want to give it to her."

"I'd worked that bit out, Harry," she said, scooting closer to examine the package. "I just wanted to hear you say it."

He pushed it towards her and crossed his arms. "What is it with girls and wanting to *hear* things?" he asked. "I just wanted to hear you say it," he mimicked in a falsetto. "If you *knew*, why did I have to say it?"

So *that* was part of the problem. Hermione held up her hands in mock defense. "Because saying things can make us realize their form and power. The words used in our spells and charms are only words when uttered by someone with no magic, and yet, the magic wouldn't work without the words." She was quoting from *A Standard Book of Spells*, and she was quite sure that Harry wouldn't know it. "You may know that this package is intended for Ginny Weasley, and I may know it, but until you *say* it, the fact remains a question, and—"

Harry was half smiling. "You're annoying," he said, but the words were friendly and had no sting. "It's a hat. And I want to *hear* what you think of it."

"A hat? For what?" Hermione picked up the package and turned it over. From its shape and size, it appeared to be a standard Hogwarts formal tall pointed hat. She looked at Harry. "Did she say she needed a hat?"

"You don't have to *need* a present," Harry said, tight-lipped. "When we were at Faeryland for New Year, she said she liked it."

"Well, I can't give my opinion unless I look—so can I see it?" Hermione asked, wondering if she was going to be able to hold in her laughter. "I promise to wrap it back up." When Harry didn't answer, she put the package back down on the sofa and said, "I'll just do a quick Revealing Charm, okay?"

Hermione pulled out her wand and muttered the spell, and nearly choked when she saw the pink, fairy princess hat in front of her. Silver glitter covered it, and the base was surrounded by cheap, fuzzy pink fur.

"It's not good, is it?" Harry asked.

"Er, well..." Hermione tried to choose her words carefully. "Pink isn't really a good color when you've got red hair?" She sighed. Harry didn't care about things like that; it was his fault that Ron owned two different orange caps. "Harry, why on earth would you think Ginny would want this hat for her birthday? What she'd really like is just for you to be there and talk to her."

"Did she say that?" He narrowed his eyes.

"No!" Hermione gently kicked his foot. "I told you she didn't tell me anything—and when have I ever lied to you?"

Harry was quiet.

Hermione smiled and patted his arm. "I'm not ganging up on you with Ginny. I'm just telling you as a friend, and... and as a girl... that this hat would only make Ginny happy if she were five years old."

Harry opened his mouth to respond, and then closed it. He was still quite red.

"Do you want me to help you think of something else?"

Eyes on his knees, Harry slowly shook his head. "I... have something else," he said, very quietly.

Hermione waited without pressing him. If he had mentioned it then he wanted to show it—all she had to do was sit and give him a minute.

Sure enough, a minute later, Harry pulled a crumpled, folded piece of parchment out of his pocket. "I wrote her a letter," he mumbled, curling a corner of it back and forth with his fingers.

That was a good sign—or not. Hermione frowned. She'd received letters from Harry. Her favorite had been the summer in-between fourth and fifth year: *Dear Hermione, How are you? I'm fine. The Dursleys are gits. Dudley's fat and stupid too. Wish I could do magic. My scar doesn't hurt, thanks for asking. Harry*

"Well?" she asked.

Harry looked up. "Well, what?"

"Are you going to let me read it, or not?"

"No!" Harry stuck the letter back into his pocket and looked at her in horror.

Hermione laughed. "Well, fine! I was going to help you, but I'm sure you're capable of saying how you feel on paper, and I'm sure Ginny will love it."

Harry mumbled something unintelligible.

"What's that?" Hermione asked, holding a hand to her ear.

"I said it's not finished, I can't give it to her. Look—" he looked desperate "—I can't give her this letter, but I can give her the hat."

Hermione held out her hand. "Harry," she said, "as I once promised to protect you, I cannot let you give Ginny that ridiculous hat."

Harry scowled at her.

"Come on, Harry, let me help. It will be like doing our homework together again."

He didn't look convinced.

"And besides," she added, "who else are you going to ask? I'm a girl, I'm your friend, I've had a lot of letters, and I know what's good. And I'm a better writer than you are, and I'll never, never tell."

His expression relaxed. "All right," he said, pulling the letter back out of his pocket and handing it to her.

Hermione opened the letter, which hadn't even been sealed. She could see, without reading it, that it was going to need a lot of help. There were several scratch-outs and a few ink blots. It started, *Dear Ginny*, except that "Dear" was crossed out.

"Get a quill, Harry," Hermione said, holding the letter up closer to her face. "You need to rewrite this."

He stared at her blankly. "I thought you were going to help me?"

"I'm not going to write it *for* you, Harry. I'm going to give you helpful suggestions. For starters, it's okay to say *Dear Ginny*. That's the proper way to address a letter to anyone."

"If you're going to make fun of me, forget it," he said, reaching to snatch the letter out of her grasp.

Hermione held her hands over her head. "Get a piece of parchment, Harry," she said.

He looked annoyed, but Summoned parchment, ink and a quill, which all landed on the table in

front of the couch.

"Right," Hermione said and looked at the letter in her hands. It read:

*Dear Ginny,
Sorry about all that stuff I said the other day.
Love, Sincerely,
Yours,
Harry.*

She handed the letter back to Harry, trying so hard not to laugh that she could feel herself turning red. "Save that letter," she instructed, when she was sure that her voice wouldn't crack. "Save it for ten years from now, when you can laugh at it. What did you say to Ginny, anyway?"

"I—she really didn't tell you?"

Hermione let out a pained, gusty sigh. "Between the two of you, I've heard next to nothing. You had a row, you've taken a break. How bad can it be?"

"Dunno." Harry shrugged. "Bad. She won't talk to me."

"Why not?"

"I'm..." He absently crumpled the letter in his hands. "I'm... she told me to sort out how I feel," he said, almost inaudibly.

"How you feel about her?"

"Yeah." Harry's face was nearly scarlet now.

"Don't you know, Harry?" Hermione asked softly.

He hesitated, then shook his head, and Hermione bit back another sigh. All this indirect, hidden emotion was somewhat foreign to her. She wished that, after all this time, Harry would just break down and let her *in*. She was suddenly grateful that Ron was loud and obvious. It made things so much simpler.

"Try telling me what you feel, then," she said. "And write it down. Write *something* down. Write *Dear Ginny* on that piece of parchment."

Harry unscrewed the top to the inkpot and dipped his quill. Hermione folded her hands together and waited until the scratching noise of quill against parchment had stopped.

"Now what?" he asked, not looking up.

"Well... your feelings come next."

Harry made a quiet noise that reminded Hermione of an animal trapped in a cage.

"It's not as difficult as you're making it. You *do* like her. Don't you?"

There was a pause. "She's'mazing," Harry finally mumbled, so quickly that the words almost didn't make sense.

"Write that down!" Hermione ordered. "*You're amazing*. Write that."

They continued in that vein for a while, until Harry had composed a whole string of favorable adjectives to describe Ginny. Amazing. Smart. Brave. Fun. *Pretty*, he'd finally told her. Soon, Harry was writing on his own. Hermione sat back, pleased, and waited for him to finish.

Finally, he looked up. "Can't I just give her the hat?" he asked.

"The hat's rubbish, Harry."

Harry sighed, scratched something out, crumpled up the parchment and started writing on a new piece.

"How do I sign it?" he asked, after several minutes.

"However you think is best," Hermione said, dying to see what he'd written. When he finally placed his quill on the table, Hermione held out her hand for the new letter. She gave a little sigh as she read the contents. It read a bit like a school essay, but the underlying sentiment came though clearly.

*Dear Ginny,
Happy Birthday. I got you a present, but it's so stupid that Hermione says I can't give it to you. She says I should just talk to you but I don't know what to say.
You're amazing. I don't know anyone else who is as smart, brave, fun and as pretty as you are. When I'm with you I feel like everything is okay, except for when I make you ill.
You wanted me to tell you how I feel. I feel horrible for that row. I feel like an arse writing this letter. I'd feel better if we weren't on a break.
Love,
Harry*

"I can't give it to her," Harry said.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said, reaching out to squeeze his hand. "You *have* to give it to her."

He shook his head, folded up the letter and slid it into his pocket. "Later," he said.

"Tonight then," Hermione stood and stretched a bit. "You can give it to her at the party. I suppose Ron's going to the Snout's Fair straight from work after all. I've got to go home and get ready for the dinner. Are you going to change?"

"Yeah," he said, standing up as well. Hermione pulled her wand and prepared to Disapparate, but Harry grabbed her arm.

"Look..." He ran a hand through his hair, making it stand up even more than usual. "I'll go tonight, for Ron, but..." He stopped. He looked suddenly angry. "I'm not giving her anything. So keep it to yourself."

"Harry..."

"No. But I'm—" He met her eyes. "I'm really glad you came by. Don't ever think that I don't care about you as much as I do about Ron."

Hermione stared at him. In all the time they had known each other, he'd never said anything like that. Perhaps it was good that Ginny was forcing him to think about his feelings. It was... really nice to hear that.

"Thank you," she said, touched. "And don't worry, Harry—it'll work out." She gave him a hug and stepped back. "You're halfway there. Besides, I already warned Ginny that an average Harry quarrel lasts at least a month, so I think she knows what to expect."

Harry's eyebrows went up. "What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

Hermione only laughed and Disapparated. But as she got ready for the party in her own room at Lupin Lodge, she wondered if it had been wise to talk to Harry after all. It hadn't seemed to sway him in the end, and she had a bad feeling that he would be as stubborn about this row with Ginny as he'd ever been about his other quarrels. She hoped he'd prove her wrong at the Snout's Fair, and she walked into town with Ginny, trying to keep the conversation light.

But at the party Harry proved only that Hermione knew him very well; he kept his eyes off Ginny and gave her nothing—not even the stupid princess hat. And if the distant look in Ginny's eyes was anything to judge by, even that hat might not have been such a horrible idea after all.

* * * * *

"*Reducto!*" Bill shouted. The air in front of him did not shimmer. "*Abrumpo!*" There was no tension that he could see, no break in the enchanted field. "*Dilabum Obex!*" Nothing happened. "*Effracto Moenius!*" "*Perfringum Maledictio!*" "*Solvo Murus!*"

"Give up."

Bill glanced over his shoulder and his heart leapt into his throat for the tenth time that morning. He felt like a kid. Fleur sat in the grass in the middle of the field where he'd learned to fly, her arms wrapped around her knees, her chin tilted up, her expression full of quiet amusement. The mid-April sun touched her face and made her eyes look like little bits of sky.

"The spell is finished," she said quietly, a smile touching the corners of her mouth. "You cannot break it."

"Oh can't I." But there was no real challenge in his voice. He gazed down at her, forgetting for awhile that he had a job to do, and she gazed back with equal admiration. It was like it had been before. There was no embarrassment between them, and no fighting. They had seen each other nearly every day for over a month, and though Fleur continued to refuse to see him after work, Bill knew it wasn't out of malice. She was simply taking things slowly this time, making sure of him and of their friendship.

He had to admit he didn't blame her. He had tried to tell her what he had discovered about veela, but she had put a hand to his lips and stopped him, saying it wasn't important and that she had been wrong, too. It was the most physical contact they'd had. Bill almost wanted to bring up the subject again, just to feel her fingers brush against his mouth.

"What's going on out there? Is something wrong?" Penelope's voice carried across the field. "Is it working?"

"It's solid," Bill called back, not taking his eyes off Fleur. "Just taking a rest."

"Let's have lunch then!" Penelope and Hermione rolled up their maps, gathered their workbags and began to walk back to the Burrow, heads together, talking animatedly.

Bill put out his hand. "Lunch?"

It didn't surprise him that Fleur shook her head. Usually she ignored his hand and got to her feet on her own, but this time she didn't even do that; she stayed where she was, and shifted her

gaze to the woods. "I would like to stay out 'ere for a little while," she said. Her voice was very quiet.

"Do you..." Bill hesitated. "Do you want company?"

"Non." Fleur gave him a very brief smile and looked back at the woods again. For the first time all morning, her clear-eyed expression clouded over and her posture slumped a little. She looked as if she were struggling with a thought she couldn't stand, but couldn't get rid of.

Bill knew the feeling. It came over him every once in awhile, as well. But he left his hand out and tried again. "You have to eat."

"I am not 'ungry."

"Even if you are not 'ungry." He laughed a bit, and was happy to see her bite her lip on a smile. "Come on. Eat a little, just to make Mum happy, and then you can come back out here on your own—I'll keep Hermione and Penny inside if you need some time to yourself. All right?"

Fleur gave him a grateful look and, breaking recent tradition, she slipped her hand into his and let him pull her to her feet. "Thank you," she said, keeping her eyes low and trying to pull her hand out of his as soon as she had her balance.

Bill held fast. He didn't want to lose contact. He wanted to hold her hand and walk with her to the house.

"Please, Bill," she whispered. She glanced up at him and then down again immediately. They were standing very close.

"I'd rather not let go," he said hoarsely. He slowly rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand.

Fleur kept her head inclined. Her hair shone silvery white in the weak sunlight and fell softly in curtains on either side of her face. The slope of her nose was slim and noble, strong and graceful, like the rest of her. Bill wanted to run a fingertip down it.

"Please," she repeated, sounding slightly panicked. She pulled her hand from his.

Bill let it go. There was nothing else for it. She would decide when she was ready to move forward with him, and he could only keep making opportunities available. Beside her, without her hand in his, he walked with her back to the Burrow. Fleur didn't speak, and he could tell that something was truly troubling her, so he stayed quiet too and let her have her sadness. Some things, he knew, were only made worse by trying to make them better.

"What did you mean, it's solid?" Hermione asked immediately, when Bill and Fleur walked into the house. She stood in front of the fireplace, half a sandwich in her hand, looking thrilled. "Do you mean it's finished? Does it work? Are you saying you can't break it—it's really complete and we can start to put it up at Culparrat? Can we start to plan how many other Charmers we're going to need? Who should we write to? Should we tell Moody and your dad right away? I think we should."

Bill wasn't sure how she said so much so fast, without breathing. "It's finished," he said. "I'd say it's time to start planning the particulars."

Hermione gave a little squeal of joy, and Penelope looked equally excited. Fleur went to the far end of the room and sat in the big, tattered armchair that Bill's father had sat in every morning for years, with his *Daily Prophet* in one hand and his tea in the other. She looked very small and pale in the big brown chair, and didn't seem to hear anything that Hermione was saying. She turned her face to the window and stared at nothing.

Bill put a plate of lunch on the little table beside her. Fleur glanced at it, and then at him. "Thank you." But when she looked back at the window without touching the food, Bill felt a stab of real concern. She never ate much, but she wasn't the kind of girl who skipped meals either. Either she was ill or it was a particularly bad day. He knew what she must be thinking about; he knew how grief could sneak up on a person out of nowhere, and he wished he had the right to help her.

"We'll have to think about guards," Penelope was saying. "Once the spell is in place, the Aurors will be free to do something else."

"Yes, they need to concentrate on Azkaban," Hermione said, and her expression changed from excitement to worry. "I think it's high time the dragon riders had a break."

Bill only half listened. He was worried about the situation at Azkaban, but more worried about the girl in his dad's chair.

Fleur picked at a loose bit of leather on the arm of the chair, then smoothed it down again with her fingers. She winced for no reason. Bill stopped thinking about Aurors and Dementors and went to get her some tea.

"Bill!" Adam sat at the kitchen table with three boys around his age, all of whom looked much less healthy than he did. But at least they were clean and sheltered, Bill thought, looking around at all of them. And if his mother had anything to do with it, they'd be filled out in no time. The plates in front of them were piled high.

"Adam, how's it going?" Bill rapped his knuckles lightly on Adam's head and greeted the other

boys. "Hullo Matthew. David. Oi, Ralph, where'd that bruise come from?"

Ralph, who was wiry and given to picking friendly wrestling matches, sported a nasty black eye. "Him!" he said vehemently, elbowing Matthew. "Doesn't know how to play Keeper!"

"I didn't *want* to play Keeper," said Matthew darkly, and tucked back into his stew. "I'm a *Beater*."

Bill checked a smile and flicked his wand, bringing a teacup out of the cupboard. He flicked his wand again and filled the cup with steaming tea. David watched enviously.

"I want a wand," he said, and sighed. He had never had one, Bill knew. He hadn't yet begun his first year, but all four of them would start at Hogwarts again in September: Adam in his third year, Ralph and Matthew in their second. There had been a fifth child, a little girl who Adam called Ella, who was supposed to begin her third year as well. But she had run away the very day she had been brought to the Burrow, and no one could tell where she had gone. Bill had never even met her. St. Mungo's Children's Home had sworn up and down that they had charmed her hair the same way they'd charmed the other children's, but Bill knew it couldn't have been a thorough job. His mother still blamed herself. And for all they knew, Ella might have made her way back to London by now, or she might have fallen into Muggle care. Muggle orphanages were being checked one by one, but so far there had been no news.

"Hungry?" Bill asked, watching Adam stuff an extra sandwich and a couple of rolls into the pockets of his robes. He had taken to wearing Bill's very old robes around the house on lesson days. He said it made him think better.

"I will be later," said Adam defensively, and added an apple to his bulging cargo. "I'm going for a walk, all right? Be right back." Overstuffed pockets clapping against his hips, he ran out of the kitchen. Bill heard the front door slam, and a moment later he could see Adam through the window, racing down the hill to the west of the Burrow. He disappeared into the woods.

"Insane," Bill said under his breath, and went back into the front room.

"Elves, of course!" Hermione was saying. "They're the obvious choice, aren't they? Not only are many of them unemployed at the moment because they were flushed out of Dark wizards' houses and left to fend for themselves, but they've got powerful magic of their own—they'd be able to navigate the prison without splinching, because they're not affected by Apparition borders! And they're terribly loyal, and their natural inclination—at least, in the majority of cases—is to provide domestic care. They'd be perfect!"

"What, inside Culparrat?" Bill asked, offering the teacup to Fleur. She curled both her hands around it as if to warm them, though it wasn't a bit cold. Bill watched her face, but she didn't look up. He sat in the chair nearest hers, and returned his attention to the conversation.

"Yes. Not as exterior guards—although they're excellent protectors, and we might use some of them at interior posts within the prison—but to keep the prison running smoothly. To keep the prisoners in meals, and clean sheets, and humane conditions."

"Not a bad idea at all," Bill agreed.

"And at exterior posts?" Penelope said. "I admit the house-elf idea is—"

"They're not house-elves, Penny, they're just elves."

Penelope gave a short, exasperated sigh. "Yes, all right. The elves are an excellent idea, and I think we should contact Hogwarts—"

"We can just contact the elvish union," Hermione said happily. "They have one now, you know."

Bill looked over at her, and wasn't sure whether to laugh or congratulate her on a job well done—or just to roll his eyes. He had heard from Ron about Hermione's enthusiasm for activism, and had assumed that the stories had been exaggerations. But she was even more earnest than Ron had described.

"All right, we'll contact their union." Penelope shook her head. "I'm asking who we should consider for the outside posts. The Aurors will have other things to attend to, once the Ministry is back in full session, and the M.L.E.S. is overtaxed as it is. The Dementors are obviously out."

Bill shrugged. "You'll have to advertise. There are plenty of unemployed wizards."

"But we can't have just anyone," Penelope said. "We need trustworthy... they'd have to be..."

"Well I'll tell you what *I* think," Hermione said. "I've been thinking about this."

"Shocking," Penelope said dryly. But she was smiling.

"I think it's time the Ministry stopped being stupid about their Dark creature classifications—no offense to Mr. Weasley, because I know he'll change it if he gets to stay in office, but I worry about what will happen if he doesn't, and perhaps we ought to press him to do this *now*." Hermione took a deep breath. "Werewolves should be employed. If we employed the werewolves, especially in Ministry positions, we'd have a group of truly loyal guards. They've been waiting centuries for someone to recognize their worth as what they are ninety nine percent of the time—*human beings*—"

and whoever gives them that recognition is sure to have their allegiance." She looked from Bill to Penelope. "Don't you agree?" She looked at Fleur. "Fleur, what do you think?"

Fleur started. She fixed glassy eyes on Hermione. "I am sorry," she said, and her voice was very dry. "What did you say?"

Hermione glanced at Penelope. "Fleur, are you all right?"

Fleur nodded. She put her teacup on the table with a shaking hand and pressed her fingers to the bridge of her nose. She shut her eyes. Her mouth opened and her breath became irregular; she seemed to have forgotten that anyone was watching. She sat still for nearly a minute, and the clock ticked in the silence.

"Fleur?" Penelope's voice was full of concern. "Are you ill?"

Bill knew she wasn't. He turned his chair towards her and leaned forward. "Can I do anything?" he asked, as quietly as he could.

Fleur's chest hitched. She pressed the heel of her hand to her mouth, covered her eyes with her fingers, and shook her head.

Bill realized with a jolt of anxiety that she was about to cry.

Seconds later, Fleur flung her other arm across her face and sobbed into the silent room. It was a sob unlike any Bill had ever heard—an empty, broken, abandoned sound that seemed to come from another body. It did not end, but stretched into a long, keening moan, too low to be Fleur's voice but too heartbroken to be anyone else's. Bill had never heard her like this—but he had felt her. Just like this. He sat rooted to the spot, terrified of the explanation for that sound.

The permanent crease between Penelope's eyebrows deepened. She came to crouch beside Fleur's chair and put a hand on her knee.

"Oh, my dear—" Mrs. Weasley raced in from the garden with Leo on her hip and Adam on her heels. At the sight of Fleur, her free hand flew to her mouth. "Poor thing," she murmured to Hermione, who was staring at Fleur with a face full of pity. "It must be very bad."

It is. Bill knew that there was only one reason for Fleur to cry like that. But he didn't want to name it and make it true.

"Ma—" Fleur gasped behind her arms, making everyone in the room jump including Leo, who screwed up his face and hid it in Mrs. Weasley's shoulder. "Ma—"

"You don't have to talk," Penelope said gently, keeping her hand on Fleur's knee. "Take your time."

"Gabrielle—"

Bill's insides turned to ice.

Fleur crumpled, dignity forgotten, pulling her legs close to her body and sobbing into the rounded side of Mr. Weasley's worn out chair.

"Her little sister," Hermione said faintly to Mrs. Weasley, who turned white and pulled Leo closer to her apron front.

Adam watched without flinching, his face unreadable.

"Gabrielle..."

Penelope knelt and kept her contact; Hermione stayed still and Mrs. Weasley hovered, twin expressions of sickened understanding on their faces. Bill could only sit beside Fleur and watch, his fingers clenched, his chest tight and his heart thudding so hard that it echoed in his head and sent blood rushing to pound in his eardrums. He wanted to be sick. It was Percy all over again.

Several minutes later, Fleur's sobs subsided and she ceased to repeat her sister's name. Her feet slid back to the floor and her arms came down and lolled like dead weights on her thighs. Bill was struck by her appearance. She made no move to wipe her face, which hung slack, blotched, wet and unbeautiful. The light in her eyes had gone out.

"What happened?" Penelope asked quietly. "Or is it too soon?"

Fleur hiccupped wetly and fumbled to pull a strand of her long hair away from her mouth. Penelope reached up and took over, kneeling up to smooth the plastered bits of hair back from her face so that Fleur could drop her hands again and sit dully, staring at nothing.

"Would you like some water?" Penelope was saying now, tucking the last of the silvery hair behind Fleur's hunched shoulders. "Would you like to have a lie down? There's an empty room upstairs, I'll take you there if you like."

Fleur stirred. She stared around the room at nothing, then fixed her eyes on Penelope. With the blank face and cracking voice of a person hardly half awake, she began to speak.

"Ma... ma soeur... she was... it was last year when..." But there Fleur stopped. She was already trembling head to toe and her eyes were full of tears again. She opened her mouth, shut it, and turned her eyes to Bill. "Please." She stretched a hand towards him.

Bill took her hand in both of his. He saw his mother, Penelope, Hermione and Adam turn their faces to him, questioning.

"Fleur's sister—" Bill's voice cracked, but he continued, making no effort to hide his emotion. She should know how much he hurt for her sake. "Gabrielle was one of the children at Mont Ste. Mireille."

Hermione winced, Mrs. Weasley gasped, and Penelope gave a low cry. She replaced her hand on Fleur's knee. Adam's eyes narrowed slightly.

"She's missing now," Bill went on. "Presumed—"

Fleur's chin trembled at the word and she shook her head. It was enough.

"Not presumed," Bill rasped, his voice so dry that it hurt coming out. "She's—dead. Fleur, how do you know?"

Fleur spoke after several failed attempts. "They 'av discovered a—grave—"

Mrs. Weasley drew a hissing breath and Penelope bowed her head.

"Where many bodies were discarded. They cannot identify the bones because the curses... there were burns." Fleur whimpered. "But they found wands. They found the wand with my—my grand-mother's 'air in the core—it is no mistake..." Fleur dissolved again into sobs.

Bill heard a raw, furious sound of sorrow and realized that it had torn from him. Fleur gripped his hand and reached toward him with her other arm, shaking all over. He stood and bent down to let her take hold of his neck, then pulled her out of the chair with one arm beneath her knees and the other across her back, to cradle her.

"I'm so sorry," he managed into her hair. "I'm so sorry." And he meant it in every way. He was sorry about Gabrielle, sorry for the way he had behaved, sorry he hadn't trusted her, sorry that he hadn't been with her to get that news. "I'm sorry, Fleur." She wept jerkily, clutching at his shoulders, and he headed for the stairs.

"My mother will not—'ave a funeral she—thinks it is best to 'ave faith but, Bill—Bill—"

He hardly saw his mother's look of astonishment as he carried Fleur away to his old bedroom; he hardly noticed that Hermione raced ahead of him to get the door and spare him the trouble. Only Fleur mattered. He brought her into the shuttered, dim blue room, lay her in the little bed, and curled up beside her when she groped for him. They couldn't lie side by side on the small mattress, so he rolled onto his back and pulled her to him. She sprawled half on top of him with her face into his

shoulder, and he put his hand on the back of her head, wanting, somehow, to give her comfort. She wept into him, channeling unearthly sobs, and Bill fumbled for words.

"I'm right here," he said, stroking her hair with one hand and her back with the other, feeling her sobs rise and fall. The shoulder of his robes was already wet through. "I've got you."

She gave him no answer except a thick snuffle that didn't sound at all feminine, let alone as if it had come from a quarter-veela.

Bill kissed her head, reached for the tissues on the bedside table and handed her several. He moved the weight of her hair to the far side of her neck and moved his fingers gently back and forth on the exposed half of her throat. "Shh." He kissed her hair again, and continued to shush her as she cried.

Eventually, Fleur graduated to quieter floods of tears and her chest stopped heaving. She'd stuck the tissues under her face without bothering to use them and their corners fluttered between her hidden profile and Bill's chest with every breath she took. It would have been a funny picture, if she had not been so grieved. Bill brushed the backs of his fingers along her hairline, and down the only part of her face he could see—the little strip of skin between her temple and the side of her jaw, next to her ear. "I'm so sorry," he whispered again. "I'm so sorry."

She braced her forearm on his chest and lifted her head. A few of the tissues came with her, stuck to her face. Bill reached up, peeled the tissues away, and threw them towards the waste bin. "Need another one?"

Fleur blinked at him, her face sticky with tears, and shook her head. "Thank you," she mumbled. She hiccupped again, and sniffed. "I want my sister." Tears jumped into her eyes. "Distract me," she pleaded, blinking away the tears. They fell onto Bill's vest. "Make me forget."

He touched her face. It was soft and cold and wet. "I can't do that," he said quietly.

"Did I—not distract—you once?" Fleur asked, still through hiccupped.

"No." Bill rubbed his thumb back and forth along her cheekbone. "You made it so I didn't need to be distracted. You made it all right."

She nodded, and fell down again with her face in the side of Bill's neck. He traced the dip of her spine all the way up to her neck and back down again, over and over, not sure what good it would

do. But her breathing stayed regular and she relaxed a little further every time he touched her.

"Gabrielle was a better witch than I am," Fleur said abruptly, after several minutes had passed in silence. "She was calm, and she was not vain. She 'ad my father's nose. It 'ad a little bump and two freckles, and my grandmother was '*orrified*." Fleur drew a deep breath and let it out again. Bill shut his eyes and felt it through his robes. "Grandmama wanted to use a potion to take them right off. But my mother refused to let 'er alter a thing. She said that Gabrielle was more beautiful for her differences."

Bill thought how true that was. He loved Fleur best when she had come unraveled and was free from enchantments.

"And she was so strong-minded, my sister. When she got 'er wand—she did not get to choose 'er wand, you should 'ave *seen* that tantrum—she told me she did not approve of Grandmama's decision, and she was not going to use it for very long. She said she wanted something more reliable than an old veela 'air in the center." Fleur laughed, then sobered. "And she did not use it for very long," she said quietly. "She was a little Seer, per'aps."

Bill smoothed her hair, giving her what comfort he could.

"Tomorrow, Bill, if... I would like it if you would come to my flat and look at pictures. I want to show her to you. Please."

"We can go now if you like—I've always tried to picture her," Bill said truthfully. "In my head she looks like a smaller version of you."

Fleur raised her head again and looked into Bill's face. Some of the light had returned to her eyes. "Non. She was 'erself. She was so beautiful."

Bill used his thumb to dry the wet circles beneath Fleur's eyes. "Would you like to go now?" he asked again. "I want to see her."

Fleur nodded and sat up. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and looked around the room for the first time. "Is this your room from when you were a boy?"

Bill looked around, registering where he was. "Yes," he said slowly. "Charlie's too, after Fred and George were born. It was Percy's room after we left. It's Adam's now—isn't he a great kid? He hasn't touched a thing."

The room bore the traces of all three Weasley boys who had lived in it. The walls themselves seemed to breathe with adolescent secrets and school holidays, mishaps and accomplishments. In lieu of wallpaper, every surface was plastered over with exam papers, O.W.L. results, letters from Hogwarts, pictures from the paper—all of it hanging precariously with the aid of many different spells. Percy's hangings were the tidiest; Charlie's the most haphazard. On the emptiest wall, Adam had begun to hang his pictures and assignments, while Bill's own things, he noted wryly, were yellowed with age—except for the awards. On the far wall, there hung six academic medals that gave off flecks of light even in the growing darkness. Two were his; four were Percy's. Below them, scattered on a shelf, were golden trophies with scarlet plates, duplicates of the Hogwarts Quidditch Cup that Charlie and his team had won more than once.

"Are these your medals?" Fleur stood and went to look at them. She traced careful fingers across the metal discs and trophies and Bill watched her, rather amazed that she was here, in the room where he'd first begun to dream about girls. Never in his wildest dreams had he given himself a girl like Fleur

"Er, one or two," he said. "The trophies are all Charlie's—he was a great Quidditch player in school, they said he could've played for England. And most of those awards are Percy's."

"Your mother leaves them up."

"Yes, well, she gets a bit proud. Can't imagine why, as you can see we were all completely useless."

Fleur glanced over her shoulder and smiled, then returned to her inspection, running her fingertips over the badges that were stuck into a corkboard. Their mother had always been proudest of the badges. The three metal plates still shone: his own Prefect and Head Boy badges alongside Percy's Head Boy badge. Percy's badge seemed to give off a strange light, Bill thought, though he knew that he was probably imagining things. He looked at the empty space on the strip of cork where Percy's Prefect badge had used to hang. Penelope still kept it with her, all the time. She'd taken the pin off so that Leo could hold it, and he clutched it in his little hand very often, when he fell asleep.

Bill got up and went to stand with Fleur. Like her, he traced his fingers over Percy's badge, and as he did it, something painful swelled in his chest. He missed his brother. Percy had been so different from the rest of them, but he'd been a strongheart. He'd been a Gryffindor. And like everyone else who'd got lost in the war, he wasn't supposed to be dead. It still didn't seem quite real to Bill that he wasn't going to have a chance to see Percy again. Talk to him. Tell him he'd never

really meant any of the wisecracks. Watch him hold his own son. Leo had been born to a wonderful father, and he was never going to know it.

They were going to have to make him know it. It was their responsibility to remember every shred of the life that had been Percy's, and pass it on.

"I am so glad I met your brother," Fleur said quietly. She took Bill's hand and rested her head on his shoulder. "It is important to me. I am so glad I knew 'im, even a little."

Bill relaxed. The painful thing that had been twisting inside him died down. "So am I."

"My sister would 'av liked you very much." Fleur laced her fingers between his and breathed out. "She liked people to 'ave strength. And passion."

Bill let the profound compliment sink into him, then turned his head and kissed Fleur's temple. She took a shallow breath and shut her eyes. Her skin was cool. He breathed in the rain smell of her hair and left his mouth on her skin for a long time, incapable of moving away until she lifted his hand in hers and inclined her head. Bill's mouth slipped from her temple and he bent his head. He watched in awe as Fleur touched her lips to the back of his hand, then turned it over and kissed his palm.

"Thank you," she murmured, and looked up at him.

Bill cupped her upturned face with the hand she'd just kissed. Her eyes were bloodshot and her skin was pale, and the tip of her nose was little bit pink. She was flawed... flawless...

She was real. She shut her eyes and tilted up her chin, and her mouth fell slightly open.

Bill's heart pounded; he knew it was her invitation—knew that he could kiss her now, for the first time in more than a year. For a moment he hesitated, unsure if it was all right or if he would be taking advantage of her grief. But then, they had shared their only kiss just after he had got news of Percy's murder, when he had been at his most vulnerable. And kissing her had soothed his heart more than he had believed anything could.

Fleur opened her eyes and in them Bill could read confusion. Hurt. She pulled back, color rising in her face. "Is this not..." she began slowly.

"Shh," he whispered, and brushed his hand back through her hair. "Close your eyes, Fleur."

She did. Bill bent his head.

Her lips were slightly chapped; that was the first thing he noticed. Soft but imperfect, so that brushing his mouth across hers sent shocks into his brain. The texture of her. The texture and the first, slow, responsive movement. The wonderful sound of her broken breathing. And her fingertips. She touched the sides of his neck, making him shiver, then touched his hair. His shoulders. And all the while their mouths brushed, gently mapping territory that had been discovered and lost, but not forgotten. There was still the same strange familiarity, as if this was the only right choice and the reasons would come later.

Bill almost didn't want to deepen the kiss. There was something heavenly about it, as if she were a ghost or an angel, something he couldn't quite hold. Something fragile that might vanish into smoke or dissolve under the weight of a breath. He ran his hands down her arms and slipped them around her back.

Fleur whispered his name and opened her mouth to his. Kissed him fully, tangled her fingers in his hair. And suddenly she wasn't fragile at all, she was flesh and blood and her body was pressed to his, and it had been a *year*. For a little while, in the dim, blue light of his childhood bedroom, Bill forgot to be gentle.

That night, back at her flat, Bill lay in bed with Fleur and looked at pictures. He read letters. He listened to stories. She spoke of Gabrielle and he spoke of Percy—all night they traded memories that seemed to flow effortlessly into one another, almost untouched by the burden of grief. When they fell asleep hours later among the keepsakes, Bill was not sure if he had asked her to stay with him forever, or if had been she who had asked him. He only knew that the exchange had been made for good.

* * * * *

Twenty-eight days. Four weeks. Almost an entire month. And not a word from Harry—not even when he'd showed up to the pub on her birthday. He'd spent all his time in the corner, and Ginny had tried to ignore him but it had hurt more than she had been able to hide. Hermione had taken her aside and told her that Harry really did care for her, but it hadn't helped. It didn't matter what Hermione said. Ginny flicked her wand at the wireless and turned off the music that had been playing while she studied—she couldn't listen to another sappy love song. She went back to stirring the Wolfsbane Potion, hardly caring what she was doing.

She supposed it was over. Not that she would ever be over Harry, in her heart—she'd love him even if he never spoke another word to her—but nothing worked between them. She'd been in pain,

one way or another, since the very beginning and so had he. Perhaps it wasn't worth it. She wasn't sure what she wanted anymore. She wished she wouldn't dream about him so much, but, short of taking a potion to keep dreams away altogether, she didn't think that she would ever stop.

She absently ladled a dose of potion into a goblet, and went to find Remus so that he could drink it right away.

"You're preoccupied," he said, when she found him at the dining room table poring over an open file that looked like official Ministry business.

She shrugged. "Go on," she said, and held out a peppermint imp. Remus swallowed the potion and quickly took the imp.

"Thank you."

"Is that stuff for Sirius?" She pointed to the papers, and Remus glanced up at her.

"No, it's the Culparrat employee proposal."

Ginny had never heard of it. "Oh. Are you working on it for my dad, or something?"

Remus gave her a worried look. "No... Hermione asked me to look over it because it's about possibly employing werewolves in the Ministry. Ginny, you were sitting at the table last night when she handed it to me. You participated in the discussion."

"Oh... right." She only vaguely remembered. "Sorry, I'm..."

"Exhausted. And at the risk of sending you flying out of the house in tears, I'll tell you again—"

"I won't fly out." Ginny sat down across from him and propped her chin in her hand to keep her head up. She *was* tired, but she tried not to let Remus see it. "I know what you're going to say, and you're right, but I just don't know which thing to give up. It's all too important."

He shook his head. "The dragons are nearly well."

"But not perfectly."

"But they're not about to throw their riders, and that was the main point. And if you won't stop with that, then at least I can take this potion at the apothecary."

"No!" Ginny stared at him. "No."

"Cut down the amount of time you spend at St. Mungo's. Do that only on the weekends—"

"It's her *parents*."

Remus sighed. "Then at least stop working privately on other people."

Ginny bristled. "I only worked on Malfoy once," she said. And it was true. Remus didn't need to know that she had consented to go to Malfoy Manor this afternoon. It was the best day for it; on Sundays she had no school, no dragon work, and she could split her time between studying and St. Mungo's—and on the Wolfsbane Potion, since Remus's transformation would occur on Wednesday. It would mark the second blue moon in a year, and two transformations in a month made for more time standing over a cauldron than Ginny had ever bargained for. Still she'd made the potion several times now, and hardly had to concentrate on it any more.

"I'm sure it tires you out just to be near him so often. Perhaps you could do less work on the dragons, if you're not willing to stop working on them altogether. They hardly need two hours of your time every afternoon. Once a week should suffice."

Ginny bit her tongue. She wasn't about to abandon Charlie and Harry and the rest of the riders to work with dragons that would get sick again if she wasn't there, but she knew it was no good to explain that to Remus. He'd just give her another speech on maturity and priorities and decisions and learning to say no, and she wasn't in the mood. Besides, she had an appointment.

She made herself smile a little. "I'll think about it," she said lightly, and stood.

"Off to St. Mungo's?" Remus looked back down at his papers.

"I was already there this morning. I'm going to go outside for a while."

Remus glanced up again, looking surprised. "That's good. Have a nice walk."

Ginny nodded and left the house. She didn't bother checking her reflection or changing out of her work robes—it wasn't that sort of appointment—and she didn't even need to grab a cloak, now that the weather had grown mild. She walked for a little while so that her excuse for leaving the house would not technically be a lie, and then she shut her eyes and concentrated on a place she couldn't believe she was going to visit. When she opened her eyes again she stood on wide, black marble steps, as impressive as the entrance to Gringotts.

Malfoy Manor.

Ginny looked up and took an unbalanced step back. The gray stone walls stretched several stories high, making her feel dizzy. Dozens of massive windows glinted in the midmorning light. The front doors were twice her height and as wide as the ones at Hogwarts. Did people really *live* like this?

She raised the heavy, silver knocker and pounded it three times against the polished black doors. The door swung silently open and a female house-elf, looking terrified and dejected, appeared in the foyer.

"Your name?" the elf squeaked.

"Ginny Weasley." Ginny couldn't believe the Malfoys' nerve. "You're free, you know," she told the elf. "It's illegal for them to keep you here. You can go whenever you like."

The elf only cringed. She gestured Ginny into the first entryway of the manor, and shut the doors. "If Miss would follow me."

Furious that she'd agreed to come on terms of complete confidentiality, Ginny followed the poor little elf through another set of black doors and into a second entry chamber. Sconces flared to life as they walked into the high, dark room, and the carved double doors gleamed at either end. They had been intricately carved with what looked like thousands of coiling, writhing serpents. They were really *moving*. Ginny shivered and tried to imagine being a child in a house where even the doors were terrifying. She looked up and shivered again; someone had mounted trophies of dead things. Not even whole bodies, but wings, talons, fangs and scales—even very rare horns. It seemed so heartless.

"You have no cloak?" the elf asked, stopping at the far doors. "No bag?"

Ginny shook her head and stayed still while the elf raised her knobbly hands. The air around them crackled and Ginny knew that she was being searched for weapons.

"Your wand." The elf held out her hand.

"Nice try," Ginny said.

"But the rules, Miss—"

"Tell Mr. Malfoy he'll have to relax his rules. I'm not giving up my wand."

The elf, looking frightened, disappeared into thin air with a *crack!*

While Ginny waited, she tried the doors at either end of the windowless chamber, and found them locked. "*Alohomora!*" she whispered, but found herself knocked back several steps by the force of an invisible ward. She steadied herself and tried to Apparate into the next chamber, but found that Apparition was also impossible. It would be difficult to break out of here, and Ron's words were suddenly loud in Ginny's mind, telling her not to be alone with Malfoy, for whatever reason. No one even knew she was here. That had been extremely stupid.

Just as she was about to panic, the door opened before her, and the elf showed a very shaky Ginny into the drawing room.

"Wait here." She left Ginny alone.

The room was bigger and higher than the entire Burrow, and Ginny walked around it, awed. On either side of the room, fires snapped in twin fireplaces, both large enough to comfortably hold a dozen people, both flanked by giant stone hydras, their fangs bared, their heads expertly detailed—Ginny was sure they were going to strike at her. The walls of the room were stone, so highly polished that they seemed to be made of silver. She weaved her way across a soft, silent carpet, between gilded chairs with velvet seats, beneath flickering chandeliers...

She was amazed. This wasn't a home at all; it was a museum. Everything was perfectly arranged and obviously valuable—and tremendously cold. Nothing showed signs of wear or age, or even use. It seemed like a very big dollhouse to Ginny, who had a strong urge to mess something up and make it more real. The room was empty in every real way; alive as it looked, it was very much dead—recently dead, as if the life force had just gone out of it and left it a shell.

Disturbed, Ginny let her eyes stray to the portrait on the far wall. It was an elegant life-sized painting of all three Malfoys, beautifully lit—a wizard painting, obviously. So the people in it should have moved. But they all sat still and stared down at the room. Only Lucius Malfoy smiled, just barely, his lips curving up at her as if to say *Yes. All this is mine. Including you.*

Mesmerized, Ginny walked towards it, but when she got to the center of the room, she felt as if her insides had suddenly collapsed. Gravity gave way—she pressed her hands to her stomach and tried to breathe. She couldn't see. It was as if she had fallen through the floor and into a tank of ice water; Malfoy Manor disappeared, and around her, in her powerful mind's eye, rose the Chamber of Secrets. Whispers filled her mind, seductive and irresistible. Riddle's whispers, his words. Riddle's handwriting unraveled across the blackness around her, page upon page of it, glowing and perfect. He had been here. Lived here, dormant, for many years. Things belonging to him were still very nearby. He was gone, and yet he remained, and Ginny felt him take root in her before she could do anything to stop it. She moaned, her heart hammering so hard that she knew it would kill her if she couldn't make it stop—

"So good of you to be on time, Weasley."

Ginny gasped for breath as if she'd just been pulled from drowning. She wrenched her eyes open.

"Keep it up and you'll earn your wage."

She barely heard him. She was so glad to hear someone that it didn't matter what he said. Ginny stumbled back until she leaned against a sofa, and she gripped its back with both hands, staring wide-eyed at the empty space in front of her. Her mind was clear. Her vision was restored. It was as if nothing had ever happened, except that her mouth was very dry and she knew she would have nightmares, tonight.

"Are you *ill*?"

She glanced at Draco, who stood poised in one of the doorways. His hair and skin stood apart in this dark vault of a room, and seemed to float above his sweeping black robes. It was an unsettling contrast.

"Do you... want to work in this room?" she asked in return.

As if he knew and liked what the room was doing to her, Draco smirked. "Did you expect another room, perhaps?"

"I don't know." Ginny let go of the sofa and straightened. "It's a big house."

"You're used to something *smaller*, I know." Draco walked through the room and waved a careless hand at the fire. It dimmed, just slightly. "I wouldn't want you to get *lost*. This room will serve." He sat in a huge, throne-like chair and sprawled out. But it was a collected sprawl, as if he'd practiced relaxing in front of a mirror. One knee was bent, the other extended; one arm dangled over the arm of the chair and the other forearm rested, fingers playing on the wood. He rested his head on the dark green velvet and swept his eyes from her head to her feet. A look of mild distaste crossed his expression.

Ginny got the distinct impression that he felt she cheapened the house, by standing in it. It bothered her, but she waited for him to finish pretending that he was relaxed and then pulled a much smaller chair over to him. She sat facing him, so close that their knees almost touched.

Draco snapped up. He pulled his legs in and glared at her. "Have a care the way you drag my furniture about, Weasley."

Ginny stayed quiet and still. His poise was shattered, his mask was gone, and it would be much simpler to work, this way. The air around him was full of awkward anger, and that, at least, was something. She put out a hand and shut her eyes.

"Wait."

Ginny felt her hand knocked away. Draco had barely touched her, but for some reason the contact was acutely painful. "Ow!" She opened her eyes and shook her burning fingers, not sure what had just happened.

"Don't whimper, I hardly *touched* you." Draco sat well back. "Now *listen* to me. I have employed you, and this is what I want—I want to sleep."

Ginny raised her eyebrows. Did he mean here, in front of her? Or just in general?

"I... don't sleep well," he went on, not looking at her now. "Minimal assistance from a Healer should make it easier to sleep... well."

Ginny worked not to show her surprise. That had been an honest beginning. "All right," she said. "Can you tell me a bit more? How do you normally sleep?"

He glanced at her. "*Badly*." The word dripped with sarcasm.

"Yes, but specifically? Do you wake up often, or do you have trouble getting to sleep in the first place?"

He sighed, obviously irritated that he had to talk about it. "I wake up often. I'm restless. I..." He paused and nailed her with a look. "Don't you ever have *nightmares*, Weasley?"

She wondered how he knew. "Yes," she said. "All right." She understood nightmares. She could help with nightmares. "I'm going to put out my hands again, if you'd kindly not hit them."

"Don't put them where they don't belong and we won't have a problem," Draco muttered. He fell back against the velvet chair, turned his head away, and shut his eyes.

Ginny gazed at him, and mixed with her annoyance was pity. Now that she knew what she was looking for, he did seem exhausted—and it was no wonder he suffered from nightmares, living in this house. She wondered why there were no sleepless shadows under his eyes. He was so naturally pale that she would have expected telltale smudges. She raised a careful hand before his face, and knew her answer.

"I'm going to have to take this... spell... off of you," she said hesitantly. And when he did not protest, she pulled her wand and repealed his Glamour.

Draco flinched, but kept his eyes firmly shut, and Ginny was glad that he couldn't see her jaw

drop. He was haggard. His skin was not icy pale after all, but ash gray and sweating. His forehead was lined. The corners of his mouth turned down. His nose was chapped, the skin under his eyes was puffed and bluish, and his eyelids were swollen and pink. Ginny tucked away her wand and held her hands out again, aware that it wasn't only sleeplessness, but grief that made him look like this. Grief and a ruined psyche.

She moved her hands across the cold ring of air that made up the surface of his aura; it felt like the stone walls of his house. Polished. Freezing. It stood out around him in a wide, impenetrable arc, much further from his body than Hermione's or Ron's. Gingerly, she pushed her fingertips forward and felt them absorbed into the innards of his energy. And underneath the polish, closer to his head, Ginny felt a mass of writhing undercurrents. She felt she'd plunged her hands into a river of snakes. It was revolting, but she marshaled every scrap of will power and kept her hands where they were. She eased her fingers along the serpentine coils of energy, smoothing them flat as she caught them and curled her palms around them, warming them. Making them fluid and human. It was slow, painstaking work, but it absorbed her so completely that she barely felt the time pass. She felt instinctively that it was right to work here, near his head, where the sleeplessness was centered. But to be perfectly sure that she had targeted him correctly, she dropped her hands lower and felt the air around his heart.

It was like another aura altogether. Ginny was shocked to feel a hard, gnarled undercrust to the frozen ring. Nothing slithered or moved here; it only ached and burned, throbbing hot and dry against her hands like something parched. She wanted to give it water. She didn't know how to help it. She stretched her fingers deeply into its roots as if she were something cool and liquid, and willed the anguish to abate.

Abruptly, there was nothing. No aura. No temperature. Ginny gasped and opened her eyes to see that Draco had shot out of his chair and was striding to the far door, his back to her.

"That's enough," he said, his voice unsteady, and disappeared into a corridor.

Seconds later, the elf appeared in the same doorway. "Master is collecting your wage," she said, and retreated into shadow.

Ginny stood, and fell back down again at once. Her knees were weak and her head pounded. She had no idea how long she'd been working, but it had taken the life out of her for today. She couldn't imagine Apparating any time soon, especially since, now that she was fully open and there was nothing else to concentrate on, she could feel this house to its depths. Ron had been held and tortured here, somewhere in this perfect manor. She could feel the shadow of his experience; it lingered, mingling with a thousand other tortures, somewhere deep beneath this showcase of a house.

"This should be adequate pay." Draco had returned with his Glamour back in place. He came straight to her chair holding an exquisitely embroidered coin pouch, which he thrust into her face.

Ginny looked at the money and knew she couldn't take it. She had no idea where it really came from. She ignored the pouch and looked up at Draco instead. "You're not what you think you are," she told him, clasping her hands in her lap. "I know what truly bad people are capable of, and you're not that." Her voice came from somewhere far away; she wasn't sure why she was saying it. But she knew it was the truth. He was not Riddle. He was not his father. He was vicious, but mostly he was lost, and she felt so sorry for him.

Draco's eyes glassed over. His hand, holding the pouch, trembled a fraction. She reached up to take it from him, and her fingers brushed his hand.

"Ow!" she cried, and snatched her hand away. The pouch crashed to the floor and coins rolled in all directions. It was like fire—something about his hand—Ginny had felt the same thing an hour ago, when he had pushed her hand away. "What was that?"

Draco looked blankly at his fingers, then yanked his hand back. Something on it flashed gold.

"What is that—a ring?" Ginny demanded. "The one with the M on it?" She'd heard about it from Ron. She'd seen the M marked on Ron's temple.

Draco glanced at his hand, making a show of nonchalance. "It was my father's," he said, his voice full of disdain.

Ginny reached out for it and managed to touch it again—but the shock that went up her arm was not physical, as she had previously thought. It burned, but in a deeper, more familiar way. It was a shock of pure power. Controlling power. Dark power. Ginny knew just what to compare it to.

"Let me see it."

Draco stepped back and pulled his hand close to his body. "What do you think you're doing?" he snapped, when she stood and lunged to touch the ring again. There was something about it—something she had to know. "Your work here is *finished*."

"Hold out your hand," Ginny said, her voice very low. "I mean it."

"Your work here," Draco repeated cuttingly, "is finished. You have your pay. If you will not leave, I will see you escorted out."

"But—"

"And don't expect my assistance with the dragons any longer." He sneered at her. "You've had more than enough time to Heal them. Though after your little display this afternoon, I can see that your *gifts* are practically a sham—I feel no different—it's no surprise that you haven't managed to get your job done."

Ginny gritted her teeth. "I bet you'll sleep tonight," she said angrily. "Let me know how that goes, and *then* tell me my work's a sham."

"Weasley," he said, his voice full of derision, "if I ever speak to you again, it won't be by choice. Now get out before I throw you out."

"Is that a threat?"

He drew his wand.

Ginny wondered if she was strong enough to fight, but it seemed she had no choice. She put her hand to her own weapon a second too late—Draco twisted his wand and she flinched—

But he only vanished. At the same moment, the room plunged into total darkness. Ginny was terrified. But almost immediately, the foyer doors flew open, and a shaft of light spilled into the massive drawing room. The house-elf scurried into the light and beckoned to her.

"This way, Miss."

Frustrated, frightened and very tired, Ginny gathered what was left of her strength. She left the spilled coins on the floor and went quickly out of the manor.

When the front doors had shut her out for good, she slumped back against them, squinting in the dying light that glared across the statue-studded lawns. Her heart raced, yet her blood seemed to be pumping slowly, like something dark and thick and tainted, and she knew that she would never come back here. She never wanted to work on Draco Malfoy again.

And she would no longer have an escort when she got to work on Monday.

"Damn," she said softly. But there was no way around it; she would simply have to do what she could from afar. She certainly couldn't ask Harry to take her up. And he would have been hurt trying, anyway.

Ginny rested against the stones of Malfoy Manor until she believed she wouldn't splinch, and then she gathered her wits and Apparated right into her bedroom at Lupin Lodge, so exhausted that she didn't even undress before falling into bed. The moment her head hit the pillow, her eyes fell shut. Her thoughts were messy and out of order—Remus's worried face, the froth of a brewing potion, the Grangers in their beds, the dragons' giant eyes, her father in the Minister's office, Riddle's beautiful handwriting, the way Draco Malfoy really looked, the splash of coins on plush green carpet, the way houses felt when there was no love in them, the way Harry's voice felt when it was just behind her ear, the way his eyes smiled when it was just for her, the way he laughed... She rolled over and buried her face in the pillow.

Her last clear thought, as the darkness tumbled over her, was that she wished she had never signed a confidentiality contract with Draco Malfoy. She wished she could tell someone that there was something funny about that ring...

A/N: Another writing credit goes out to Jedi Boadicea, who is again responsible for much of Draco's dialogue and behavior.

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Blue Moon

The noise of Sirius placing Locking Charms on the shack behind Lupin Lodge had become almost pleasant to Remus since Ginny had first made the Wolfsbane Potion. There had been some discussion, back in Autumn, of Padfoot staying inside with Moony, but Remus had firmly insisted that the wolf be isolated... just in case. At first, Sirius had wanted him to stay inside Lupin Lodge, but Remus simply would not risk it. A missed dose or an improper preparation would render the potion's effects useless, and the last thing Remus wanted was to be free to roam through Stagsden as a fully-fledged werewolf.

So Sirius locked him in each month and then settled outside the shack as Padfoot, no matter what the weather, checking in occasionally until the transformation was complete. Remus surveyed the little room with some amusement; it was lit by a floating lantern and, with each moon, more and more pillows appeared on the floor—even though the wolf would have been perfectly comfortable to lie on the hard surface. In one corner, there was also a dinner tray.

"Thanks for supper," Remus called through the door.

"It's your favorite," said Sirius. "Steak."

"Be nice if it was cooked," said Remus, eyeing the plate of red meat in the corner.

"It's for later. If I cooked it, you'd only eat it all now," said Sirius.

"Hmph."

Remus arranged some of the pillows so that he could lean against a wall, and closed his eyes. He knew what pain to expect now when the Wolfsbane Potion took effect, and it wasn't as bad as a full transformation, but it wasn't pleasant either. His stomach twisted into a knot, and he tried to think about anything other than what was about to happen to him. The flowers that were already blooming in his garden, his lesson plans for Ginny next week, Lupin Lodge when his parents were alive...

A loud, barking noise made him open his eyes. "What's going on, Padfoot?"

It was another minute before he received an answer. "A rat! You've got rats, Moony. Disgusting."

"Don't blame me, blame Crookshanks. He's supposed to be looking out for them, but he seems to be a vegetarian."

There were a few country rats around Lupin Lodge. As a child, he'd found them cute. But since Peter, he'd never been able to look at rats objectively.

Remus's skin grew suddenly and unnaturally warm, and he felt a pang of apprehension. The sun had almost set, and the transformation was coming; he was less nervous about it now than he used to be, but it was still an unhappy experience. Partly because the physical sensations were so jarring, and partly because his mind wandered to dark, forbidden places when the wolf began to set in. He couldn't help it; when he transformed, he always thought about the night of Peter's death. He had used to think of James and Lily, or of the day that Sirius had been thrown in Azkaban. But since the end of the war, he had repeatedly seen Peter's frightened face, and Snape's impassive one. Now was no exception, and he heard Sirius's raw voice inside his head as the scene replayed itself.

"I've already been convicted of this murder. I've served time for it. I've been pardoned by the Ministry and now I'll commit the crime if I see a need... And make no mistake, Peter. I see a need. Get on your feet."

Remus resigned himself to the echoes. He let them come through, as they always did, and tried to distance himself from them. He didn't need to see it all again, didn't need to concentrate on it—but there was no stopping it. That night had come back to him so many times. The night Peter had returned to Hogwarts. The night they had bound him to Snape's desk and poured the Veritaserum down his screaming throat. Remus flinched and turned his head, as if he could escape the memory.

"Why did you run from Voldemort?" Snape's voice had been cold and quick.

Peter had lain there staring at the ceiling, panting so hard that his pasty cheeks had wobbled. But his voice had been strong and clear and full of forced truth. *"I killed the Weasley boy too early. He gave us false information and I didn't realize it until it was too late. I wasted a golden opportunity."*

"And then?"

"And then Malfoy told the Master that you and I had ruined everything. You had given the boy a useless potion and I had been too stupid to guess it. Then the Master said that he had suffered me to live too long. That I was a greater detriment than an asset. He raised his wand."

"But you escaped."

"I had my Animagus."

"And you came here."

"I thought I would be safe."

Sirius had given a bitter, horrible laugh, and clenched one hand around Peter's throat, making him gasp and gag.

"There's no time for your whims, Black." Snape had swiped Sirius's hand away, and Peter had sucked in air. *"Tell me, Wormtail, what do you know of Voldemort's future plans?"*

"He will attack Hogwarts again."

Sirius, Remus and Snape had looked grimly at each other. None of them had been surprised by the idea, but to hear it confirmed had struck anger and fear into all of them.

"When?"

Peter's eyes had looked wild. *"I don't know. They won't tell me. The Master hasn't trusted me since I told everyone it was I who betrayed the Potters."*

Snape smirked. *"Yes. I'm sure you expected your..."* He had paused. *"Touchingly public display of fidelity to bring you closer to the center of the circle. But Voldemort had no wish to see Black pardoned--"*

"Neither did I," Peter had said fervently, and Sirius has gone for his throat once more. Remus had stopped him, allowing Peter to continue. *"But Malfoy--and all the rest of them--meant more to the Master than I did, and I wanted the world to know that I had been the one to bring him closer to his great goal."*

"Backfired, didn't it," Sirius had said with grim satisfaction. *"I'd thank you for getting me pardoned, Wormtail, but you don't deserve that much breath."*

"But--but I did get you pardoned," Peter said, trying to catch Sirius's eye. *"I tried to pay my debts, can't you forgive me? I have nowhere to go, I've fallen out of favor--we were friends once--"*

"I'm sure he doesn't care," Snape had said, almost smiling. *"Now tell me everything else you know."*

Peter had lain silent. Tears had escaped his eyes.

"Nothing? You know nothing?" Snape had looked disgusted. *"Useless all around..."*

"Severus, you know what it's like," Peter had pleaded, twisting uselessly on the desk. *"You understand how they turn on you, don't you, and how they treat you like an enemy even after you've served them--you remember how they stop telling you things, and how there's nowhere to turn--you remember being cast out of--"*

"I left." Snape had smiled thinly. *"I was never cast out. But I'm afraid I do understand all too well your predicament..."* He had raised a black eyebrow and plucked Peter's wand from his belt.

"What are you doing?" Remus had asked, watching carefully.

"Sending him back to his Master."

"NO!" Sirius had turned on Snape, his teeth bared. *"We'll kill him now. I'll kill him myself, I want to see him dead, I won't let him--"*

"Perscribus Totalus," Snape had muttered over Peter's wand, and then he had drawn his own wand and touched the tips of the two together. *"Transfero Perscribus."* He replaced Peter's wand in his belt. *"There now, Wormtail. Be useful for once in your life, would you? Go back to your Master, and let us hear everything that goes on between you."*

Remus had been stunned for a moment by the brilliance of the idea. Everything Peter heard, so long as he had his wand, would transfer through Snape's wand so that they could hear it too. They had never thought Snape clever when they were younger, but lately, in almost every aspect, he had earned Remus's grudging respect.

"Yes," Remus had whispered, and caught Sirius's eyes. *"We have to send him back."*

Sirius had looked torn and furious.

"I won't go," Peter had panted. "And even if you send me back, I'll repeal the charm, or I'll get another wand, I'll—"

"Never noted for his cleverness, was he?" Snape had hissed, still smiling. And he had flicked his wand over Peter's terrified face. *"Obliviate Triduum."*

Peter's eyes had gone blank for a moment, and then he had shaken his head, taken in the sight of all of them as if for the first time, and given a scream very like the one he'd given when they had poured the boiling potion down his throat.

They had muted and camouflaged Peter with charms and taken him to the gates of Hogwarts, where he could Disapparate. Sirius had been the one to unbind him and to step aside, shaking, so that Peter could escape.

"Get out," he had rasped, trembling from head to foot with what Remus knew was a violent, barely controlled desire. *"GO!"*

Peter had looked confused and disbelieving, but he had wasted no time. He had Disapparated at once, not realizing that Snape had erased three days from his memory. Peter had no recollection of the murder of Percy Weasley, or of the confrontation with the Dark Lord, and so he had been all too willing to run back to the Master he thought would protect him...

"He's going to his death," Remus had said quietly, as they had stood at the gates together in silence.

Snape had snorted, pulled his wand and given it a disinterested flick. A strange noise had hissed from it, like wind or heavy breathing. The sound of someone traveling by broom, perhaps. Or Floo powder. The sound of Peter returning to the secret lair of the Death Eaters.

"Perhaps before he's disposed of, we will learn something valuable."

Disposed of. The words had given Remus a sickening chill.

"Harry." Sirius had turned toward the school. *"He'll need to hear this."*

And they had strode back to the castle to gather the people who would benefit most from whatever they were about to overhear.

A pain in Remus's legs forced him to return to reality, and he bit back a groan as he felt his transformation begin. His skin began to prickle and his bones began to shift uncomfortably in their sockets—but he could stand it. He always thought he couldn't, but then he always did. It would go away in a moment. He took a deep breath and tried to keep his eyes closed as they too began to shift beneath their lids, changing their shape and color. Changing the way he saw the world. But he kept them tightly shut, though it was painful; he didn't like to watch himself transform, it was too disturbing to look down and see his legs change shape. They weren't *his* legs, they belonged to the wolf, and he, as Remus, refused to see them.

"Remus! It's almost dark, how're you doing in there?" Sirius called.

Remus opened his mouth to answer, but a snarl escaped instead, and he found that he was unable to respond in any other way. He tried—frantically, he reached up to feel his face, and discovered that it was still human. Growling again, Remus clawed at himself, trying to find himself—he was slipping away and something was not...

"Shouldn't someone have followed him back to find their location or—"

"Perhaps you would have liked to volunteer, Miss Granger." Snape's lips had curled. *"Be my guest. Hurry down to the gates and attempt to track his Disapparition, and then pick your way through the battery of passwords and wards that separate us from wherever he has gone. Only do be sure you don't stumble into a situation that you cannot control. I'm no longer there to minister ineffectual potions and protect the secrets of—"*

"Shut your mouth." Ron had looked slack and ill. He had been the only one of them not standing—he'd pulled a chair into the circle and Hermione stood behind him, her hands on his shoulders. And though Snape's eyes had glittered, he had said nothing, as though even he had felt the grievous impact of Percy Weasley's death.

Hermione had just taken a deep breath—probably to ask more questions—when a crackling noise from the end of Snape's wand had brought them all into a tighter circle around his dungeon desk.

"Well. Wormtail." Voldemort's voice was recognizable to all of them, but Harry had gone the palest at the sound of it. *"You've returned to us... perhaps bravery lives in you after all..."*

"Wh-what do you mean?"

Something was terribly wrong in the present, and it was almost enough to drown out the past. As Peter stuttered uselessly in his head, Remus opened his eyes and tore at his clothes—the shack was too hot and something was smothering him. Was it the memories? Remus tried with all his strength to turn his thoughts to something that would pacify him—*No. Don't want to.* The wolf was strong tonight. And the wolf wanted to think about darkness, and evil, and ... Voldemort.

"Have you returned to apologize?"

"Apologize?" Peter's voice had been tiny and terrified.

"Is your memory so short as all that?" Voldemort had sounded amused. *"You have cost us a potential wealth of information, Wormtail."*

"H-how?"

Low laughter had followed his plaintive question.

"My Lord, I believe he's been Memory Charmed." The voice belonged to Lucius Malfoy.

"Oh yes? Well then let us see just how far back his memory goes... What does the name Percy Weasley mean to you?"

Ron had buried his head in his arms while Harry and Hermione's faces had gone tight with anger and grief.

"H-he works for the Ministry, he—"

"He is dead." Voldemort no longer sounded amused. *"By your hand. Do you know who charmed you?"*

"S-Severus Snape and Sirius Black and Remus L-Lupin."

"Ah.... So you ran back to your friends at Hogwarts..."

"I d-don't remember—"

The wolf forced Remus to remember. Remember how Peter had sounded and how much Remus had hated that voice. It was cowardly—so cowardly—how had they never noticed? How had he masked his true ambitions for so long? Remus hated himself for being so stupid. So trusting. So blind.

Blind. He couldn't see. For a moment, the shack was dark. And then everything came back into focus—the colors were muted and gray, but he could see further to his right and left, and the shapes of the pillows and blankets seemed to be outlined in black. A pain shot through Remus's head—more intense than it had been in months, and he opened his jaws and howled.

"Remus! What's going on? What's wrong—"

But Remus only howled again in miserable fury as he felt his mouth elongate, becoming a muzzle through which fangs began to burst like knives. Sharp. Dripping.

"Break his mind." Voldemort's casual command made Peter whimper.

"Yes, my Lord." Lucius sounded pleased. And then there was a whipping noise, followed by the sound of Peter stumbling and screaming.

"What do you remember now?"

"N-nothing—no—NO!" Another whipping noise, and more screams, and now Hermione's hands were pressed over her face and Minerva was white as paper. Ron, however, raised his head. His eyes gleamed.

"And now?"

"I don't know—I don't—please, PLEASE—"

"Remus! Please, Remus, answer me—"

Sirius's words were garbled. Language was losing its meaning. Remus knew, just barely, that he was a man, not a wolf, and that he should have understood the words that were being shouted. He also knew that the shouts came from a friend. A companion. And yet he growled hungrily, because no matter who it was, it was a man. Human. Flesh and bone.

The wolf snarled and Remus crumpled to all fours. Fur shot through his skin. His arms and legs bent back and the joints realigned; his skin tightened and his muscles shrank.

"Not again! I remember!"

"What do you remember, Wormtail? Be quick, or another corner of your mind will be destroyed..."

"I r-ran to Hogwarts and they caught me, they strapped me down, there was Veritaserum and they made me talk, but—"

"What did you tell them?"

"N-nothing—I can't remem—"

Another whipping sound, and Peter's scream was so intense that Remus had expected Snape's wand to splinter.

"Don't kill me! Don't kill me, I have information! On Potter!"

The room had gone completely still, and Harry had taken a ragged breath and whispered, *"On... me?"*

Loud banging on the door of the shack. Rough shouts. Even through the charms and the metal, the wolf could smell the man. There was meat in the corner of the room, and he turned to sniff it, but it could not hold his interest when the *man* was so close. The wolf threw himself at the scent, howling again when his shoulder hit the door but could not break through. He tried again. Remus was still there. Remus wanted the wolf to stop, but the wolf hadn't been allowed to satisfy its appetite in so long...

"What does he know about Potter?" Minerva had glanced worriedly at Harry, and then at Snape.

"Nothing," Snape had said disdainfully. *"He may have overheard us discussing the use of Neville Longbottom as Mr. Potter's Secret Keeper--"*

"But I don't have a--" Harry had protested.

"As there is, in fact, no Fidelius Charm in place," Snape had interrupted, *"Pettigrew only thinks he has information. He has nothing at all."*

"But if he says what he thinks he knows," Ron had said dully, *"they'll all be after Neville next."*

Hermione had blanched. Harry had rubbed his temples and shut his eyes.

Remus could barely make sense of the memory now. He was thrown against the wall of the shack by the wolf, who wanted flesh. Food. Blood. Wanted to bite, to growl, to snap, to tear to pieces. There was a voice outside the shack but it was incomprehensible now, it was only babbling, like the voices in his head, which would not stop—would not stop... Remus knew he had to let go. The wolf had won; there was no fighting it. The walls of the shack were hard and cold and it hurt, it hurt to slam against it—but if he would just let go, then he would not feel the fear. The shame. There would only be hunger and fury and *need*.

"Tell me what you know, and tell me now."

"No, not yet," Peter had said hurriedly. *"Not until I can repeal--"*

The Recording Charm. They had all looked at Snape's wand, and Remus had hoped against hope that the sound would not cut out now, not when they needed so much to know what was going to happen.

"No...?" Voldemort's voice had been like ice. *"Do you mean to withhold information from me, Wormtail? But why? Does your conscience pain you? Have you suddenly appointed yourself Potter's new protector?"* Voldemort's cackle had been horrible to hear. *"Too late. Before the school year ends, so will Potter's life. It will end in his haven, in front of his protectors, as it should have ended in his home in front of his mother, sixteen years ago. Do you think you can spare it?"*

"I'm not trying to—that's not--"

"Do you wish to save the son, since you gave away his parents?" Voldemort had laughed, and Sirius had looked like he might vomit. *"There is no redemption for you now. Tell me what you know, or I will end what remains of your miserable life."*

There had been a long silence, during which Remus had feared that Peter had repealed the Recording Charm after all. And then—

"You'll kill me either way, won't you."

Peter's voice had floated out of the wand, as clear and strong as it had been under the influence of Veritaserum, filling their circle with its strange vibration. Strange because it had been... *Peter's* voice. Not Pettigrew's, not Wormtail's—not cowardly or frightened—but a voice Remus recognized from his childhood. The voice of a person to whom he had told his deepest secrets. The voice of a trusted friend. Of a Gryffindor.

"Would you like to find out?" Voldemort had whispered.

"No. I don't want to die." Peter had given a faint laugh. *"But I'm going to. I'm not as stupid as you think I am. And I've... given you enough."*

Remus could have sworn that he could hear Peter smiling.

"Everything I know about Harry is going with me."

"Wait—stop him—Expelli—"

"Avada Kedavra!" Peter had shouted.

Crack!

Dead silence had followed the terrible snapping noise, and Snape's wand had begun to smoke. Remus had watched, in shock, unable to believe what he had heard. Peter was gone. Like James. Forever. And had he truly taken his own life... for *Harry's* sake? It was so unexpected that Remus hadn't been able to process it. It was as if Peter had come back to them for one golden moment, and then slipped through their fingers again—irrevocably this time. At the same time, he and Sirius had bowed their heads, though Remus had been sure that Sirius could explain the sudden sorrow no better than he could.

"Is he... dead?" Hermione had whispered.

Snape had slid his wand into his belt and given a curt nod. *"So then,"* he had said, as if they had been listening to nothing more pivotal than a Quidditch match. *"They'll come before the end of the year, and they plan to kill Potter here, on the grounds. That is more than we knew an hour ago. Let us inform our allies and prepare."* And he had swept out of the dungeon, leaving the rest of them to hover in their circle, gray and ashen and full of a grief that would never be complete, because they could not truly mourn Peter. Not after what he had done. They could not mourn him, and yet he was dead, and he had once been worth remembering well, and there was nothing simple anymore, nothing clean, not even friendship, not even sorrow... everything had been tainted...

It didn't matter now. From somewhere far, far away, Remus let go. Peter was dead. It was all gone—all over. Remus was gone too; he had slipped away and the wolf was all that was left. The wolf was alive and aware and full of violence, and there was a man beyond the metal wall—a man, a *man*. The wolf flung himself at the metal, trying to break it down and get to the flesh it so desperately wanted.

But the man was suddenly gone. His scent still lingered, but now the stronger scent was that of a dog. It barked, asking to be let inside, and the wolf howled again and scraped at the door with his claws, which stuck in the metal and began to tear away from the pads of his feet with every anguished scrape. Still, he could not stop himself; he wanted the dog—the dog would distract him from the overwhelming craving—but there was no way to let him in.

Spittle foamed from his muzzle, and he gagged but continued to hurl himself at the door until he could not stand on all fours. He tried to get up, but fell to his side, whimpering in pain. One of his back legs would not support him. Angrily, he tore up the blankets in the tiny enclosure with his front claws and his fangs. He pulled himself to the meat in the corner and ravaged it. And then he continued to snarl and thrash, using his front claws to scrape with painful futility at the metal of his prison walls.

* * * * *

"GINNY!" Sirius raced into Lupin Lodge, his heart pounding, his breath coming in gasps. "WHERE ARE YOU?" He could still hear Remus howling and thrashing against the metal of his prison—the neighbors would hear the sounds of his violent transformation, and Sirius had to do something about that, but first he had to find Ginny.

The house was silent and mostly dark; Hermione had gone over to Ron's house earlier in the afternoon and Ginny wasn't anywhere downstairs. Sirius ran to her bedroom and knocked hard on the door.

"GINNY?"

There was no answer, but Sirius threw the door open in order to be sure. He lit the lamps.

Ginny was fast asleep—and not even in her own bed, but on the floor, sprawled out among a scattering of open books and what looked like a half-written letter.

Sirius dropped to his knees beside her and shook her by the shoulders. "Wake up!" he shouted, and she opened her eyes, looking very confused and a little bit frightened.

"What?" she said groggily, but she sat up at once and pulled her wand. She stumbled to her feet with Sirius's help. "Is someone in the house?"

"No, it's Remus—he's not—the transformation—it's *real* again, he's the *wolf*—listen to him, can't you hear him?"

For a minute, neither of them made a sound, and in the silence there was a horrible, distant growling and a terrible scraping of claws on metal.

Ginny went white. "Oh no," she whispered. "No, no—he isn't—he can't be—"

"He *is*," Sirius grabbed her arms. "What can you do about it?"

Ginny mutely shook her head, her eyes full of horror, and Sirius's heart sank. He had hoped that perhaps with her talents there would be something she could do to stop it—to arrest the process, or make it less painful.

"What went wrong?" he demanded. "Didn't you give him the potion?"

Her mouth opened and she seemed to be trying to speak, but her voice had obviously failed her.

"Come on," Sirius said, unwilling to wait. "You have to try, there has to be some way to make him suffer less. You have to help me."

Ginny went with him. Together they ran down the stairs and out into the back garden, the sounds of Remus's agony growing louder with every step. The rasps of his claws were horrible; it sounded as if he would rip them out if he continued to drag them like that on the unforgiving walls. But his growling was full of something more than violence; it was punctuated by painful yelps and a sickening gurgling noise. He was in terrible anguish.

Sirius and Ginny came to the outside wall of the shack and Ginny raised her shaking hands, looking sicker every second. She felt the air along the wall, while, from behind the bolted door, the wolf's growls grew nastier and more ferocious.

"We can't stay out here," she finally said, her voice dry. She backed away. "It's making it worse."

"We can't *leave* him," Sirius barked, unable to believe that she would consider it. "He's in *pain*."

"I know," she whispered. "He—there's a broken bone—he's hurting himself."

Sirius felt icy panic grip his heart. "You can't let him."

"I can't *stop* him." Her voice shook badly. "And he can smell us. It's aggravating him, making him hungrier—you can stay as Padfoot but if I stay it'll just—oh, Remus." Ginny choked. "This is my fault." She whirled and fled into the house.

Sirius followed. "There has to be *something* you can do!" he roared when he had found Ginny again, already curled up and rocking on the sofa, tears streaming down her face. "You're a Healer—at least make him sleep, or make him—"

"I can't," she managed, through her tears. "That's a kind of magic I can't touch. It's inside him in such a way—I can't—I *would*—I wish—"

"Wishing isn't going to help him!" Sirius shouted, staring furiously down at her. "Are you just going to sit there and let him break his own bones?"

Ginny gave a horrible sob.

"What happened to that Wolfsbane Potion?"

She shook her head and covered her face with her hands.

"You *did* give him every dose, didn't you?"

Ginny nodded, then shook her head. "Yes, but it—it must've been b-bad—I suppose I wasn't p-paying enough attention—" Her voice was muffled and thick. "He kept saying I was doing too m-much and getting too tired and that I was going to hurt m-myself, but I hurt *him*, I hurt him..." Ginny gave a miserable little cry. "I didn't mean it, I didn't m-mean it, I never would have hurt him on p-purpose—" She broke off and started sobbing in earnest.

For a moment, it was all Sirius could do not to throw himself at her in a rage. But the moment quickly passed, and he found, to his surprise, that he could feel very little anger towards her. She was obviously tortured about it. Obviously wracked with guilt.

"I didn't mean to hurt him," she wept again. "I didn't listen. It's all my fault, and I can't fix it and he's never going to forgive me—"

But her words were not new to Sirius; they echoed back to him from a buried place in his mind. He had betrayed Remus once. A very long time ago. And he had cried too, when he had realized the scope of what he'd done.

"He'll probably forgive you," Sirius rasped, after several minutes had passed and Ginny had not stopped sobbing. "It'll only make you feel worse."

Ginny rolled onto her stomach and buried her face in the sofa cushions. Her back heaved, and her muffled crying mingled with the faraway sounds of a keening, desperate, hungry werewolf, who was in terrible pain.

"What do you mean you... didn't pay enough attention?" Sirius stood at the end of the sofa and gazed down at her, needing to know exactly how all this had come about.

"H-he told me to give up some of m-my activities but I wouldn't listen." Ginny's voice was so muffled by the sofa that she was barely intelligible; Sirius knelt beside her and leaned closer to her hidden face. "He said I had to stop, he said at least I shouldn't be working on people privately, like—like Malfoy. I told Remus that I only worked on him once, but then I went and did it again—"

"You lied to him."

Ginny lifted her head and showed him her tearstained face. "No. But I didn't tell him the whole truth."

Sirius knew how that went. He also knew, from recent research with Ron, that Draco Malfoy was not the entirely useless brat that they had all assumed him to be, and he felt a stab of concern for Ginny. "You worked on Malfoy by yourself?" he demanded. "Again? Where? The same pub?"

She looked right into his eyes with her bloodshot ones. "At his house," she whispered. "I know it was stupid. I wish I'd never gone. Don't shout at me. And don't tell Harry."

Sirius gave a short, shocked laugh. He stood and began to pace back and forth in front of the couch. "Don't tell *Harry*?" he asked sarcastically. "Because that's the main concern here, is it? What your boyfriend thinks of you?"

"No—" Ginny sat up. "No, Sirius—"

"Shut up and stop crying for just one minute and consider what you're saying." Sirius fixed her with a wrathful glare. "Who cares what the hell Harry thinks of where you were? What the *hell* were you doing at Malfoy Manor alone? Without telling anyone? If Harry finds out about it and he wants to give you a good kick in the arse for it, I'll be right behind him."

Ginny mouthed soundlessly.

"Harry's ego—and lying to your professor—is *nothing* in comparison with the kind of grief you might have caused your family and friends, do you understand that? Did you fight a *war*? Do you remember *nothing*? What will it take to drill sense into your head?"

Ginny seemed incapable of an answer.

"You love to tell everyone what an adult you are, and perhaps you've done many things that no child should ever have to do. But you're no adult. Real adults know their limits. They take precautions. Real adults make priorities—they do not make serious commitments and then fail to uphold them. What good are your talents if you're going to abuse them like this?"

She stifled another miserable noise.

"Can you hear him out there?" Sirius demanded. "There's nothing he can do about that, and you left him to it because you weren't paying *attention*. How does that feel?"

Ginny drew up her knees and buried her face in them.

"He's taught you, and stood up for you, and given you incredible opportunities. He realized what you *are*. This wasn't what was owed him."

The wolf gave another disgusting, pain-riddled howl, and Sirius shoved his hands through his hair in despair.

"This is going to take him forever to recover from, you have to realize that."

Ginny lifted her face again and her eyes pleaded with him. "I'm sorry," she managed. "I'm so sorry—"

"Don't apologize to me, I'm not in any discomfort. It's him you'll have to face. And believe me, it's going to hurt you worse than you know. Because he's going to be a hell of a lot kinder than I am, and you're not going to have the relief of feeling angry and wronged."

Ginny wiped her face. There was another sickening scrape from outside, and she winced and clutched at her knees. "Do you... want me to leave?" she asked shakily. "Do you want me to go?"

"Can't you bear to stay?"

She got some of her color back and put her feet on the floor. She folded her hands in her lap and looked down at them. "I'll stay," she said. "I'll... I'll help him in the morning. I'll do everything I can. I won't work on the dragons anymore after this, or on anyone else, I'll just study like he's been asking me to and—"

"Save the promises for him," Sirius said shortly. "Sit here and do your thinking on your own. I'm going to go and keep him company, since that's all either of us can do."

Sirius was about to leave when something possessed him to lay his hand on the crown of Ginny's bowed head. Perhaps it was the color of her hair, and someone it reminded him of. Or perhaps it was just that he knew what she was suffering. He wasn't sure.

"You'll be more use to him if you get some sleep," he said, as gently as he could. "So don't bother sitting up and torturing yourself. Goodnight."

Sirius dropped his hand and went outside, where he immediately transformed and bounded to the door of the wolf's tiny jail, to whine with him and make him know that there were some things, some people, who would never let him down if they could help it. Never again, anyway.

It was a very long night.

Until he had come to work for the Ministry, Ron had never paid much attention to the news. Except for the odd personal article about Harry or Hermione—or both—the world of politics and social issues hadn't held much interest for him; he had preferred to stick to the sports page and forget that the rest of it mattered. News from the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office had seemed a bore, and even his father's abrupt promotion to the Minister's office had seemed more a personal triumph than a newsworthy one.

Ron wasn't sure when he had started to read the paper so eagerly, and it still seemed strange to him that he understood half of what was going on in it. But he had sat hunched over it all morning, fascinated and absorbed, trying to predict what would happen in the world next.

The *Daily Prophet* had published a list of the newly elected Privy Counselors. Rose K. Brown, Ron was not surprised to see, had been re-elected and remained the Secretary Privy to Magical Matters. He'd voted for her. She might have been a Slytherin, but she got the job done, and his dad really depended on her. The rest of the list was an amalgam of names—some re-elected, some new to the Ministry, some Ron even recognized from school—all of whom would bear the responsibility of selecting the new Magical Advisory and the next Minister of Magic. Ron scanned the list again and again and tried to remember everything he knew about every recognizable name on it. These people would decide whether his father stayed in office, and Ron wished he could predict what their decision would be. He wondered what Hermione would do if he dragged Mr. Archibald's orb up from his secret basement, and tried to unfog a bit of the future.

"Ron?" Sirius's head appeared in the small fireplace on the far end of the office; he looked pale and somewhat haggard. "I won't be in until this afternoon. There was some... trouble with Remus's transformation last night."

"Is he all right?" Ron asked at once. "What happened? I thought the Wolfsbane—"

"You'll have to ask Ginny." Sirius narrowed his eyes. "I know it's a bad day for me to be out—can you handle it all on your own?"

"Yes," Ron said at once, sure that he could. He'd organized most of it, after all. Today's agenda—if it all happened as planned—would be, on some levels, the most satisfying day of Ron's life. He was only sorry that Sirius wouldn't be around to appreciate it. "Don't worry about it, do what you need to do. If there's any real problem, I'll let you know."

"Thanks." And Sirius's tired face disappeared from the flames.

"Well that was some raid."

Ron's head snapped towards the door. Seamus Finnigan stood just inside the office, looking the way he'd used to after pulling all-nighters before exams. He had a sheet of parchment curled in his fist, and a box of files floated in the air beside him.

Ron put the paper aside, and forgot about Sirius's problems and the impending elections. Bad transformations aside, and new Ministry or not, he'd been anticipating this all morning. He'd been dreaming about it for months—years, even—and now it was finally here. "What happened? Did you get anything?" He could hardly stay in his seat. "Come in, sit down, tell me everything."

Seamus sat across from him, let the file box drop to the floor, and cracked a grin. "You've got your man, Ron, I'm sure of it. His mother's been taken to Culparrat and Stunned, and Malfoy's being collected from the dragon camp as we speak."

"YES." Ron slammed his fist into his palm. "Wish I could *be* there!"

"As for what we found—" Seamus held out the parchment and Ron unrolled it with manic fingers. "Creepy stuff. If there's anything on that list you don't recognize, just ask." Seamus sat back and gave a satisfied sigh. "I like doing raids. Especially when they're productive."

"What time did you go in? Were you up all night?"

"We were up too early, preparing. But we waited for Malfoy to leave for work before we stormed in—you should've seen his mother's face when we pulled up her floor." Seamus whistled. "You should see the whole manor, really. Enormous place. Fireplaces bigger than my flat. Smart looking, but—" He gave an exaggerated shiver. "No thanks."

"Where was the trapdoor?"

"Under the carpet, right in front of a big family portrait. It was so well charmed that we'd never have found it if we hadn't known it was there to begin with—thanks for that. How'd you know it was there, anyway?"

"Oh, well, you know." Ron waved the parchment about. "I keep my ears open."

Seamus quirked an eyebrow. "I believe *that*," he said. "Dodgy answer, Weasley. Seems I'll be having to raid your house next."

"Do my washing while you're in there, would you?"

Seamus laughed. "No chance of that—I've seen your washing. Go on, read the list."

Ron studied the parchment. "Whispering Soot," he said. "Of course—how much was there?"

"Enough to listen in on every fireplace in the country."

"And if they were using it, that means someone had to be *putting* it in every fireplace in the country."

"Illegal Floo stops can be tracked, to some extent. I'll see what we can find."

Ron nodded. "No good trying to track it from Malfoy's house, though," he said. "They'd've had some underling do that kind of dirty work. Right... what's this? China dolls?"

"China dolls. Just like it says. About two dozen of them. I've got no idea what they're for, I just put them on the list because I don't need another lecture from Diggory about being thorough."

But to Ron, it rang a bell. "Hermione told me a story once," he said slowly. "About the witch who made the Goblet of Fire. Nitka Nemesy, I think it was. She was crazy, they said. Used to get back at her enemies by trapping them in dolls, and selling them out of her shop."

"Christ!" Seamus looked revolted.

"Handing those over to the Aurors is your best bet—or Curse Breakers. Give them to the Curse Breakers."

Seamus shook his head. "Hermione's read some... interesting books."

Ron glanced up and grinned a bit. "Yes." He looked back at the parchment and continued to read. Dead men's wands... Veritaserum... potions ingredients that pointed to Dark draughts... A silver hand with working joints... "He kept Pettigrew's *hand*," he breathed. "That's just sick. What's 'The Chair'?"

Seamus shrugged. "We're not sure. Some kind of metal throne. They probably used it for strapping down victims of torture. It has binding cords at the wrists and ankles."

Ron felt the blood drain out of him. "Oh." He rubbed at his wrists under the desk. "All right." He stared at the list, but it was a long while before he could really read anything. "Heads in jars," he finally managed. "What's that all about?"

"We asked Mrs. Malfoy the same question. Three big, green glass jars sitting on three-legged tables, and each one had a head floating in it."

"And what'd she say?"

"She tried telling us it was *art*," Seamus snorted. "I asked her why she didn't have them on display in her nice front room if they were so artistic. I thought she was going to scratch my eyes out."

"I'll bet." Ron scanned down the remaining list of illegal possessions until he came to something that turned his stomach.

No. 33-Polyjuice Potion (contained in 173 labeled jars)

- a. Albus Dumbledore
- b. Severus Snape
- c. Cornelius Fudge
- d. Minerva McGonagall
- e. Rubeus Hagrid
- f. Arthur Weasley
- g. Ronald Weasley
- h. Virginia Weasley
- i. Hermione Granger

"Disgusting, isn't it."

Ron realized his mouth was hanging open in horror. The list went on and on. "You don't mean to say—"

"Turn the paper over."

Ron did. The list of names continued, and there were students, teachers, Ministry employees and Death Eaters alike. "But he didn't—he *couldn't*. Polyjuice Potion doesn't keep. Does it?"

"I think it can be flash frozen."

"Flash—?"

"Sorry. I don't know a wizard term for it... Petrified? No no, that's something else. Amazing I got any N.E.W.T.s isn't it? The point is, the Malfoys could have turned themselves into some pretty influential people."

"My dad... Ginny..." Something cold washed through Ron's heart. "Hermione," he said faintly. "I wonder if... when her parents... if Malfoy used... if her parents thought that *she*..."

"Stop." Seamus put a hand out. "Her jar was full. Never touched. But... just so you're not shocked when you see it, it seems someone must've paraded as you, at least once."

Ron's skin crawled.

"Dozens of others were used, too. We think it's how they managed that massive break in, at Gringotts—the goblins would've noticed a lot of big men and scary looking women going in there to do damage all at once, but Hogwarts students and Ministry officials?"

"Makes sense."

Seamus nodded. "But you know what surprised me? He didn't have a batch of Harry down there."

It didn't surprise Ron in the least. "Well, who'd want to be Harry? Half the wizarding world had orders to kill him on sight," Ron muttered as he filed the parchment away. "Thanks for this. It's a great help."

"My pleasure." Seamus stood up and stretched. "I'll leave you with the files, shall I? I need a bath. And a beer. See you, Ron."

"See you." Ron was already dragging the file box closer to the desk. He withdrew the first file, marked *Cosmetics*, and opened it. "Organized about it, weren't you?" he whispered. The papers were meticulously arranged, alphabetized and sorted by date. Every receipt, every letter was in its proper place. Ron read them in order, not sure what cosmetics had to do with Death Eating.

Ten minutes into the file, he was beginning to get the idea. And the idea made him nauseated. He said a couple of foul words to the file, and smacked it onto his desk.

"Are those new legal terms?"

Ron looked up, feeling sick. "Hermione," he said. "Hi. What are you doing here? I thought you were working at the Burrow."

"I thought I'd see what you were doing for lunch," she said. "You don't look pleased."

"No, I am." Ron put a hand out. "Come here."

Hermione shut the door. She came around his desk, took his hand, and let him pull her into his lap.

Ron wrapped his arms around her and shut his eyes. "Every time I think I've read about the worst possible crime, something tops it," he said. "I can't believe what people are capable of."

Hermione put her arms around his neck and kissed his hair. "What's got you bothered?"

"I don't even want to tell you."

"Well now you *have* to tell me." She laughed a little, and played her fingers through the short hairs on the back of his neck. "Go on, I can handle it."

"The Death Eaters were doing business in the Muggle world. Selling products to Muggles. Did you know that?"

"No." Hermione shifted a little. "But it makes sense. What were they selling?"

"Is La Rouge familiar to you?"

"The cosmetics company?" Hermione shrugged. "I've heard of it."

"What do you know about it?"

"Not much... it's not a department store line, or anything, it's dirt cheap. Girls at school probably used it. Why?"

"It's full of powdered Maidenhair root."

Hermione was still for a moment, and then she pulled away and looked at Ron in horror. "But that causes infertility."

"The La Rouge eyeshadows are nothing but Maidenhair, mixed with colored powder. It's in the lipstick, too. And the shaving cream, and the body lotion."

"How could they?" she whispered. "How *could* they?"

Ron didn't know. "There must be twenty files. I haven't had a chance to look at the others, but I think they're all cheap, everyday products geared towards thinning out the Muggle population."

Hermione said a few choice words of her own.

"Agreed." Ron brushed the back of one hand down her cheek, and ran his thumb across her determined chin. Perhaps it wasn't exactly the best moment, but she was always most beautiful when she was in a righteous passion. "Going to go destroy some Muggle merchandise now, are you?"

"Of *course* I am. You tell me what else you find. It's all coming off the shelves if I have to curse it off myself."

"You won't have to do it yourself." Ron kissed her chin. "I'll help. I'll even wear a button, if you like."

"Whose files are they? Where did you find this?"

"They were Lucius Malfoy's."

Hermione's mouth curled as if she'd tasted sour milk. "I hate them," she said quietly. "I really do."

Ron slipped his arm around her again and ran his hands up and down her back. "Well listen. Malfoy Manor's just been raided—"

"What?!"

"Shh. Narcissa's already in Culparrat, and Malfoy's on his way there *right now*. An Auror should be by any minute to tell me when it's finished—Moody said he'd make sure I knew exactly what was happening at all times."

"Ron!"

He laughed. "I couldn't tell you until it was official. And I can't tell you much else, honestly, until they've been tried."

She gaped at him. "You're telling me you've been collecting evidence to put Malfoy in prison, and you never said a word?"

He tried to look modest. "I couldn't."

"But Ron!" She sat back, on the edge of his knees, and looked round-eyed at him. "How long have you been working on this?"

"Two months." Ron hadn't thought it was possible for her eyes to open wider.

"Is this what you were doing that day, when you couldn't tell me where you were?" she demanded.

"Er—yes," Ron lied quickly. "Yes it is."

"And do you think—is he going to—is there enough evidence—" She stopped. "I know you're supposed to be giving everyone a fair trial, and looking at both sides," she said, more calmly, but he could still hear the flutter in her tone. "And I'm glad that you and Sirius have been so moral—it's tremendous." She leaned forward, kissed Ron softly on the mouth, and pulled away. "But I hope Malfoy rots."

A loud knock on the door sent Hermione out of Ron's lap and back around the desk, straightening her robes.

"Mr. Ronald Weasley?" called an unfamiliar voice. "Are you in there, please?"

"Come in."

A young woman pushed open the door. "Elizabeth Duzen," she said, and held up her identification. "Auror." She glanced at Hermione. "Would you rather speak in private, sir?"

Ron shook his head.

"I've been sent to tell you that Draco Malfoy has been arrested and transported by force to Culparrat. He was replaced by a newly trained dragon rider at eleven-thirty this morning."

"Has he been stunned?"

"When I left Culparrat, sir, he was still awake." The Auror gave a curt nod. "That's all," she said, and left the room.

Ron stood. He knew it was petty, juvenile, shallow and unprofessional, but he didn't care. He wanted to see Draco Malfoy struggle and cry and get stunned like the criminal he was. "I'm going over to the prison," he said to Hermione. "I... there are questions. It's part of giving them fair trials—I have to ask every new prisoner some rudimentary questions—" It was the truth. He snatched a blank form and a quill from his desk, and pulled his wand.

Hermione grabbed his arm. "You be careful," she said. "I wouldn't put anything past him."

"Don't worry about putting things past him," Ron said, giving her forehead a swift kiss. "Just put a nice big Imprisonment charm up around him, and I'll be satisfied."

Hermione nodded and let go of his arm.

Ron was at Culparrat and through prison security in a matter of minutes; they were used to his abrupt arrivals now, and he was led quickly to the dank chamber Moody liked to use for interrogations. He knew before going in what he was going to see—the prisoners were all treated alike. Malfoy would be strapped to his seat, sitting across the table from Moody or one of the other top-notch Aurors, looking strangely small and helpless. They always did.

The actual sight of it, however, was so satisfying that Ron stood in the doorway for a moment and drank it in before he spoke. Malfoy sat up perfectly straight with his face turned away. He was still in his dragon riding gear. Ron could only make out a bit of his profile but he could see that Malfoy's expression was aloof. Distant. He'd probably been completely silent, and he was within his rights to be so—he had no obligation to speak to the Aurors without a defender present.

Moody sat hunched towards Malfoy, one gnarled fist curled on the small table that separated them, shaking his head. "Your turn, Weasley," he barked, and Ron jumped. The eye in the back of his head was as unsettling as it had ever been.

Malfoy's head snapped around and he looked at Ron with mingled disbelief and hatred.

"April Fool's," Ron said, and worked to control the victorious smirk that threatened to take over his face. Moody didn't help; he stood, turned from the table and gave Ron a wink before scraping out of the chamber. Ron badly wanted to snicker.

"Weasley." Malfoy's nostrils flared. "I thought I smelled a *rat*."

But Malfoy's nasty words were ineffectual now. As long as they were directed at him through prison walls, Ron imagined he could handle all the petty insults in the world. "I reckon you're still smelling that trap room of yours, Malfoy," he said easily. "I understand your family kept hold of Pettigrew's hand. Fascinating. Shall we go over a few—"

"I'm not speaking to anyone until I can see what you've done to my mother. Not that I intend to answer any of *your* questions, in any case." Malfoy's voice, like his posture, was stiff and regal.

Ron had to give him credit for maintaining composure; under the circumstances, he would have expected Malfoy to act like a whinging baby. Then again, he *was* asking for his mummy. "You're not going to see her," Ron said, and sat in the chair where Moody had been. "She'll be perfectly safe here until she's tried, and so will you." Ron lifted his quill and parchment, slightly. "Of course, your trials will take a year to arrange if you won't answer any of my questions, but that's up to you."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed into slits. "You are not keeping my mother in this *place*, Weasley, you small-minded idiot. Or me. You will take me to my mother *now*." He strained at his bonds, but the chair, which had been magically secured to the ground, did not move an inch.

Ron watched him struggle until the pale skin beneath the binding cords had grown an angry red. He then spread his parchment on the table and consulted it as though nothing out of the ordinary was happening. "Is your full name Draco Ptolemy Malfoy?" he asked, and poised his quill.

Malfoy's furious growl was most unlike him. "It's a name you're not even worthy of speaking, Weasley. I have no intention of answering any of your questions, or Alastor Moody's, or any of the so-called Aurors you've roped into serving your pathetic family." His breath came hard and fast. "This is all a sham, Weasley, don't think the world doesn't know it. Any wizard with any self-respect knows you'll pander any sort of tripe to suit your own ambitions, because you weren't born to anything of substance. Now let me see my mother before I bring your parody of a Ministry down around your ears for this outrage."

Ron glanced up at him, stung. Malfoy was wrong. *Wrong*. It wasn't a parody, it wasn't a sham—perhaps it was a shell of the Ministry it had once been, but its leaders were uncorrupted and good. Perhaps it was time that it all got back on its feet—perhaps the Minister required an official appointment now that people were ready to concentrate on such issues again—but that didn't make him worthless. And now that the new Privy Council had been elected, everything was underway.

Still, the grain of truth in Malfoy's speech was difficult to hear and Ron wished, not for the first time, that Malfoy were as mute and stupid as Crabbe and Goyle had always been. But from the look on his face to the words from his mouth Draco Malfoy was stepping into the role his father had always played in the wizarding world; and though Lucius had been a contemptible man he had not been stupid, and his threats had never been empty.

"Right," Ron managed, after a difficult pause, "we'll just move on to the pertinent questions, since you're determined to be uncooperative. I'm sure your personal information won't be hard to find. Suppose you tell me a bit about the glass jars with the—"

"Yes," Malfoy interrupted harshly, "I'm sure you have an *excellent* source for my personal information, don't you Weasley? Dignity means so little to your family that not even the Ministry's much-vaunted *Healer* feels the need to stay true to contracts of confidentiality. I do hope she gave you quite an interesting story." Malfoy's face was pink with fury and his hair fell into his eyes but he glared righteously through it.

Ron faltered. Ginny had said once that she kept the confidentiality of her subjects, and she had admitted to working on Malfoy in the Leaping Fish. Had she known something? And not told him? "What are you talking about?" Ron demanded.

Malfoy made a noise of pure anger. "What am I talking about? God." He tossed his head and cleared his eyes. "Your slag of a sister, Weasley. By all rights *she* should be the one sitting in this accursed chair."

Ron's insides burned. He forgot that Malfoy was at a disadvantage. He let go of quill and parchment, shot out of his seat and leaned across the table, bringing his face uncomfortably close to Malfoy's. "Name calling's only going to dig you deeper," he nearly whispered. His breathing was labored and painful in his lungs. He wanted to *kill* him. "How does it feel to be the one in the chair,

you bastard?"

Malfoy's eyes widened slightly and he leaned back.

Ron wasn't finished. "By the way, the M.L.E.S. found a very interesting *chair* in your manor, Malfoy. Along with the hand I mentioned. And the heads. Care to see the rest of the list, or can you recite it for me?"

Malfoy breathed hard and tried to pull further away. He said nothing.

Ron leaned in, merciless. "No clever answers now? Cat got your tongue?" He waited. "Pity. While you're attacking my sister, why not tell me how that sick father of yours got a hold of her hair? And *mine*?" Ron leaned in further still; he could smell the damp of Malfoy's panicked sweat. It gave him a thrill. He *owned* him. "Didn't have anything to do with that Polyjuice Potion, did you?"

Malfoy caught a choked breath. "Perhaps he rummaged in a rubbish heap of cast-off robes at a secondhand *shop*," he managed, but his voice cracked and his words were childish. Useless.

Ron remained where he was for as long as he could stand to be in close proximity, then sat back in his chair. "You're pathetic," he said quietly. "You know that?"

Malfoy straightened his shoulders. "I demand that you release me at once," he snarled. "I demand to speak to the Secretary Privy. I demand to see my *mother*."

It was amazing. He even made demands while arrested, as if this were all a joke and he could buy his way out of it the way he'd always done, with everything.

"I want to give you an opportunity to defend yourself," Ron said slowly. It wasn't true. But it was his job to make sure that prisoners were fairly tried, and he supposed that he would do it for Malfoy, the way he'd done it for everyone else. Perhaps with a little less care.

"Do you honestly believe I'm going to let *you* defend me?" Malfoy gave a cold laugh. "Public defenders are for urchins, Weasley. I'm sure you're well suited to dealing with them, but *me*?"

Ron stiffened.

"And besides, how can you possibly be objective?"

"Why, because you brought a case against me?" Ron interrupted.

"Not least because of that. But yes, come to think of it." Malfoy's smug smile made Ron want to throw another, harder punch than the one he'd thrown last summer at the Snout's Fair. "Don't forget, Weasley," Malfoy breathed, "I can reopen that case at any time within the next few years, and bring you to trial for assault, whether I am in prison or not."

"Yeah, and you're going to look really credible if you do," Ron spat. "Dropping the case when you were worried I was going to dig up information on you, and then bringing it up again now as a distraction tactic? It won't work, Malfoy."

"Oh won't it."

"No. No one's going to care about what I did—or didn't do—when you might have cost people their lives. Speaking of which, the more information you can give me about what you've done, the more places you can point me where I can do some research, the better your chances are of getting what you want. But your demands aren't going to help you." Ron looked Malfoy dead in the eye. "And your money's no good here."

Malfoy gave a scornful, shaky laugh. "You're so stupid, Weasley. You can't hold me here. You *can't*."

Ron stayed silent and looked at him. He *could*. But it would have been redundant to say so.

"I don't need to buy my way out of here," Malfoy said, speaking quickly. "All I have to do is explain how your sister breached honorable contract to give descriptions—and lies—about a house in which I paid her for her services. Apparently not even good coin is enough to buy your family some dignity."

Ron blinked. He couldn't quite understand what Malfoy had just said. "A house in which you paid... Ginny?" Ron stood perplexed. He had told Ginny not to be alone with Malfoy. He'd warned her—and even if he hadn't, was she that stupid? Had she really... "In your house?" he repeated.

"Oh, the monkey can think?" Malfoy snorted. "Marvelous. I'm so glad that you're here to defend me."

But the insults were lost on Ron, who narrowed his eyes at Malfoy in disbelief. "What, are you—are you serious? She worked in your house? On you? Under some kind of contract, is that what you're trying to tell me?" Then she knew things. She had to. If Malfoy was guilty of anything, and Ginny had really been working under contract, then she might have felt something specific. There had to be information.

"Brilliant powers of deduction, Weasley." Malfoy's expression had frozen again; he looked detached and composed. "And don't try to fool me. Any information you came by, you came to it illegally. Do you think you can prosecute me on that kind of flimsy evidence? You have nothing on

me—or my mother.”

Ron looked away. While it was true that he hadn't received any information from Ginny, his knowledge of the Malfoys' trapdoor had been illegally gained. At least, it had been against Hogwarts rules. And he knew for a fact that to impersonate another under the guise of Polyjuice Potion was a crime punishable by several years' imprisonment. He and Harry had been minors, of course, but there was always the chance that it would come back to haunt them if anyone ever found out. Not that anyone would. Only three people knew.

Four. Ron winced at the memory of Myrtle. Not that Malfoy would even begin to know where to look, or whom to ask, but there was always the *chance*...

Thrown off his questioning, Ron looked back at Malfoy and tried to regain his momentum. “Look,” he said as calmly as he could, “I really am going to research your defense. If there's anything you can tell me about what we found...” He paused. “And we found more than the trapdoor, Malfoy. You're going to have to explain to me where you were on the thirtieth of June when the rest of us were in the Great Hall getting a commencement speech.”

Malfoy paled slightly, though his expression did not break.

“If you had anything to do with opening the Hogwarts gates to the Death Eaters,” Ron continued, “then you're indirectly responsible for quite a few deaths and disappearances. Professor Snape's, among them.”

Malfoy's face twisted. “Go to hell, Weasley,” he snarled. “You don't have a hope with any of this.”

“Don't I.” Ron stood and pocketed his quill and parchment, full of awesome satisfaction. Clearly, Malfoy had no intentions of giving him any information, but that was fine. Contract or no contract, if Ginny knew anything then she could point them in the right direction. “I'm sure it doesn't surprise you that Blaise Zabini would be sitting in the next cell, if he'd survived.” Ron turned his back on Malfoy and went to the door. “You know, Mrs. Zabini had an interesting correspondence going with your father—she's in there keeping your mother company, if that makes you feel any better.” He stuck his head out and asked the guard to go and get Moody.

“You're nothing but a barbarian, Weasley,” Malfoy hissed. “If you don't let my mother out of this place right now you *will* regret it—she doesn't know anything.”

Ron whirled and fixed Malfoy with a triumphant look. “Doesn't she though?” he asked. “Sounds as if *you* do, then.”

Malfoy blinked, looking stunned and furious for a moment, as if he'd realized what he had just implied about himself.

“If you want to get her out of here,” Ron pressed, “why don't you just tell me exactly what she *doesn't* know?”

Malfoy's stunned look turned to one of fury. “You haven't won anything. Nothing. You have *nothing*, Weasley, just like you've always had nothing. You *are* nothing, and that won't change, and when I get released from this hole you're going to be *very* sorry.”

“You know, you're right.” Ron laughed a little. “If you get released from this hole, I'll be very, very sorry.”

Malfoy visibly ground his teeth and his glare was full of cold hatred. He flexed his white fingers on the ends of the armrests, his muscles taut. For a brief second, sitting there in his impressive dragon gear with wrath in his eyes, Ron thought that Malfoy actually looked competent.

“Finished, Weasley?” Alastor Moody thumped into the room and stood beside Ron, his rolling eye on Malfoy.

Malfoy's strong appearance vanished. He shrank back in his chair.

“I am,” Ron said. And then, with relish—“Go ahead.”

Moody nodded. “You'll be woken,” he said curtly to Malfoy, “in time for your trial.” He raised his wand. Malfoy made a move to get as far back in the chair as he could, but it was useless. A second later, his eyes fell shut and he slumped. His chin lolled onto his chest.

Ron sighed into the silent chamber, and the sound was full of such an old and deep satisfaction that beside him, Moody began to laugh.

“Is that so?”

Ron glanced at Moody. “You wouldn't want to turn him into a ferret or anything, would you? You know, to save space?”

Moody furrowed his scarred brow. “What are you on about, Weasley?”

“Nothing,” Ron said. “Never mind. See you later.” And with a last look at Malfoy's trapped,

unconscious form he left Culparrat, walking on air.

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Beleaguered by Halfwits

It was the longest morning that Ginny could remember. She wasn't tired—though the only reason she had been able to sleep was that she had wanted to be ready to help Remus in the morning. But she had woken at sunrise with a churning stomach, too afraid to go downstairs. He probably wouldn't want to see her. She couldn't imagine he'd let her help him. No matter what Sirius said, Remus wasn't going to forgive her for putting him through this.

She dressed quietly and went to sit at the top of the stairs, wrapping her arms around her knees. She listened to the distant slam of the back door, the low murmur of Sirius's voice and the stumbling of weak footsteps—of someone hopping. Hobbling. She heard the creak of sofa cushions and a sharp, anguished noise like a bark. Remus, in pain. Ginny heard Sirius mutter spells... heard his low voice continue to speak after the spells were long done... heard her name, and flinched. She heard a teacup and saucer clink together, and another noise of pain. Heard Remus rasp something unintelligible. And then there was silence, interrupted only by a rhythm of deep, heavy snores.

Sirius climbed the steps towards Ginny, weariness and anger in his eyes. He stopped halfway up and stared at her. "He's sleeping," he said shortly. "Don't disturb him."

"I won't." Ginny moved to let him pass, but when Sirius came to the step where she sat, he paused and laid a heavy hand on the crown of her head. Like last night. It gave her relief; she wasn't sure why, but she was able to breathe out.

"He asked to see you before he fell asleep," Sirius said, very quietly. "He's worried about how you'll take this."

Ginny looked up at him in horror. Worried about *her*? How *could* he be?

Sirius's pale eyes cut into her like razors. "Makes it worse. Doesn't it." He left her sitting there and walked past to shut himself up in his room.

Ginny waited in still silence, listening for Remus to stop snoring and stir so that she could help him. He had to let her help him. She wouldn't stay up here any longer—she wouldn't be a coward. When he woke, she'd go and face him; it was the only way.

But she didn't know how she would look him in the face.

It was at least an hour before she heard the teacup clink against the saucer, followed by a heavy creak of cushions, as if he'd fallen back.

Ginny stood. Her stomach was tight and she held both hands clenched behind her back. She didn't want to see the damage she had done. But she walked down the steps and into the front room without hesitation, and she fixed her eyes on the blanket-covered heap that was Remus.

His eyes were closed. He was so pale. And the shadows in his face were deep and blue and... not all shadows. Bruises stood out, all along his jaw line, and he was gaunt beneath a glimmer of stubble. Ginny had never really noticed how finely boned he was. He was slight, like Harry. And thin. Perhaps quite strong, but easily broken.

To prove it, his leg was in a splint, suspended by a charm so that it could heal properly. She stared at it, and waves of guilt and sickness passed over her.

"Come here," he said hoarsely—suddenly—nearly sending Ginny out of her skin. His eyes were still closed.

She went towards him and stood over the couch, not sure what to do.

"Remus..." Her voice wasn't working. Her heart beat painfully. "Remus, I'm so sorry. Please... can I help you?"

"Do you mean Heal me?" His eyes fluttered open and his gaze was incredulous. "I would have thought... you would have learned... something about limits." His eyes fell shut.

Ginny couldn't stand up. She sank down and sat on the table, trembling.

"On second thought." Remus sounded strangely like Dumbledore. "Put your hands out, Ginny. Open up to me. Assess the state I'm in, and tell me precisely what you feel."

Ginny blanched.

"Go on. It's good practice, isn't it?"

She wanted to run away—but could not. He couldn't have punished her better. She got to her knees beside the sofa, held up her hands and extended them over his head.

"Oh—" The cry escaped her before she could stop it.

"What?" Remus lay very still. "Tell me... exactly what the damage is, and where you feel it."

Ginny gathered all her strength—there wasn't much. "Your—head hurts." Her voice shook. "You've got a bad ache, especially... on the left side. You hit your skull." She drew her fingertips through the air over his face and wished she had not grown so deft. She could feel everything. There was no guessing anymore. "You've got a bruised cheekbone and jaw, and a swollen lip." Her voice still wavered. It sounded far away. "But it's not swollen yet. You bit it not long ago. It's going to be bad in a little while, it already hurts, or it would if you pressed on it."

Remus pressed his lips together and winced. "True."

She didn't want to go on. "You pulled a muscle in your neck... your throat hurts. You...well. You've obviously partly lost your voice."

He cleared his throat and nodded.

"Your arms are... all right. No." Ginny let her fingers linger in the hot air around Remus's right elbow. "You hit your elbow. Hard. It's sore. I think you split the skin." She clenched her hands shut when they came to his fingers—his hands were in so much pain. "You... ripped your fingernails," she whispered, noticing for the first time that there was dark blood crusted under all of them. He must have nearly pulled them off, clawing at the walls. "Remus..." And her voice was shaking again.

"It happens."

But it *shouldn't* have happened. Ginny wished there wasn't so much more of him to assess. She felt the air over his stomach; it writhed and lurched and she couldn't make sense of it. "I don't know what's wrong with your stomach," she said honestly. "But you're ill."

"Well, that's what comes of eating raw meat and not fully digesting it before transforming back into a man." Remus opened his eyes and fixed them on her face, as if daring her to accept the full truth of his situation.

Ginny hoped she had kept the disgust out of her expression. Carefully, she moved her hands down along the aura of his legs—first one and then the other. His left one was fractured at the calf. She shook her head and shut her eyes. "I'm so sorry," she murmured, and didn't even bother to name the injury. It was obvious to both of them. She felt along his feet and realized that his toenails were as bad as his fingernails—they ached and stung—he'd nearly pulled them right off.

She couldn't speak any more. She withdrew her hands and hid her face in them for a moment, then dropped them to her knees and sat back on her heels. She wouldn't cry in front of him. She wouldn't do it. She was not the one in pain. Ginny forced herself to look at him.

"How do you feel?" he asked quietly.

"Horrible," she replied.

Remus studied her face for a moment. "Physically, I mean?"

She wasn't sure why it mattered. "Fine," she said. "I'm fine. But you're—"

"Think of what that means," Remus interrupted, his eyes bright. "You're very open right now, Ginny. And you're assessing a werewolf, just hours after a full moon. And you are not in any pain."

Ginny stared at him. He was right. Shocked, she looked at her hands.

"How very far you've come." He sounded proud. "That was a perfectly accurate assessment—congratulations. You're clearly much readier to work than I recognized."

She looked at him and wasn't sure why her lungs were so empty and her heart was so tight. "No I'm not," she said. "I haven't come far, I'm an idiot. Remus, I made you like this. I *hurt* you."

He laughed faintly. "Oh, I think we can safely blame someone else for making me like this. You weren't even alive."

Ginny tried very hard to control the tears that wanted to fall. "You know what I mean," she said, and swallowed. "I wouldn't listen to you and I was... so stubborn and I thought I had it all... under control... but the potion..." She swiped at her eyes and bowed her head. "I thought I could do everything. I took on more than I—I didn't tell you I went back to work on Malfoy."

"At his home. Without telling any of us." Remus gave an angry snort. "Sirius told me. And I understand he told *you* in no uncertain terms that you couldn't have done anything more foolish."

Ginny nodded.

"Not that he has any room to give that kind of lecture."

She raised her head and found that Remus was looking kindly at her. Sirius had been right. It made the ache go deeper to know that Remus had already forgiven her for putting him through such an agonizing night. She studied the bruises on his face—it was such a *nice* face—and tears sprang up again in her eyes.

“Don’t, Ginny. It’s as much my fault as it is yours.”

“Wha—” She had to laugh, though it came out more like a cry. “You have to be joking—”

“I never should have asked you to do something so time consuming while you were in the midst of your studies. I knew it was a risk.”

“It wouldn’t have been a problem if I hadn’t been doing so many other things,” Ginny said vehemently. “And I’ve thought about it, and I’m not going to *do* other things. I’m going to turn in my badge at the Ministry. I don’t need to be with the dragons anymore.”

Remus quietly watched her.

“I won’t work privately on anyone else until after my N.E.W.T.s, I swear it.”

He nodded. “And you won’t make the Wolfsbane Potion either. I will take it at the apothecary.”

Ginny’s heart gave a nasty thud. He wouldn’t ever trust her after this. “All right,” she whispered.

“Of course, if you *choose* to make it for me after you have passed your N.E.W.T.s, then we can make arrangements at that time. But until then, I want you free of this responsibility.”

She wasn’t sure she understood. “So you... you still think I...”

“I know that you can do it.” Remus smiled a little. “For you it’s not a matter of ability, it’s a matter of focus. Yours has been... scattered.”

She nodded. Hesitated. She didn’t want to give everything up—but she had failed Remus so profoundly that she no longer trusted herself to do much of anything. “I’ll just study for exams, then,” she finally said.

“Yes.” Remus looked straight at her. “And I imagine you’ll want to keep working on the Grangers as well.”

Ginny’s mouth opened, but no sound came out. She didn’t know how to answer. She desperately wanted to work on the Grangers, but she couldn’t believe that Remus would even consider letting her near anyone else, after what she’d done to him. “You... you tell me what’s all right,” she managed, after a minute. “I’ll follow whatever schedule you set.”

Remus’s eyes widened. “Is that so?”

She nodded.

“Well.” He looked like he was trying not to laugh, and Ginny couldn’t imagine why. “If that’s the case, then I can’t see why you shouldn’t spend an hour a night at St. Mungo’s.”

She had been spending two hours a night with the Grangers, and she would be sorry to give up any of that time. She had also wanted to begin working on the Longbottoms... but she was determined to do what he asked. “All right.”

“I’d like to see you putting more effort into Arithmancy and Potions—Potions *class*, Ginny,” he said quickly, when she winced. “That wasn’t meant to be snide.”

“No, I know.” She was quiet for a minute. “All right, I will,” she said, determined to prove it. She would improve her marks. She would treat her professor with the respect he deserved. There would be no more careless homework, no more childish demands. She could hardly bear to think of her behavior up to now. “I’ll go and get my books. But... I hope you’ll let me sit with you today and get you what you need. Your tea and things.” She paused. “And I wish you’d let me take the pain out of your hands and feet. But I’ll understand if you say I can’t. You tell me what I’m allowed to do for you.”

Remus nodded, and Ginny got to her feet. She went upstairs, still feeling horrible, but also strangely lighthearted. She gathered her books and went downstairs, and wondered why she felt so grounded. So tall. She floated an overstuffed chair over to the couch, sat beside Remus, and opened her Arithmancy book. He did not ask her to help him with his pain, and she knew it meant that she was not allowed. At one point, she asked if he wanted more tea, and he said he wouldn’t mind a bit more.

But he was asleep again by the time she had returned to fill his cup.

She sat sentinel beside her teacher, shushing Crookshanks when he meowed for supper, and waving Hermione out of the room when she got home from her work at the Burrow. “I’ll explain later,” Ginny whispered, when Hermione looked curious and put out.

Not long after that, lulled by the deepening shadows of the room and the relentless monotony of textbook Arithmancy paths, Ginny slumped in the chair and dropped into a very light slumber.

“...not fair that you’ve spent your whole life as the pivot point for other people’s personal realizations...”

Ginny stirred. She didn't know how long she'd slept, but Sirius was talking.

"Stupid people have always changed their ways at your expense, haven't they?"

"Ah yes." Remus laughed quietly. "Stupidity—that's obviously your problem. Both of you. I'm beleaguered by halfwits."

"Well, what would *you* call it?"

"The inability to separate personal desire from actual reality."

Sirius was silent for a minute, and then he sighed. "Damn, it makes me miserable when you're right."

"Really?" Remus asked. "Interesting. How does it feel to be perpetually miserable?"

Ginny snickered.

"She lives." Remus's voice was pleasant. Less scratchy. Ginny opened her eyes to see him sitting up and looking laughingly from her face to the book that lay open in her lap. "I see you couldn't get enough Arithmancy."

"I... really did try to study," she began, but Remus waved her off.

"I know, and I'm glad you're awake," he said. "You've got a visitor."

"I do?"

Sirius raised an eyebrow at her. "My godson is outside."

Ginny's stomach was ice. Harry. Tonight. After everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours, she wasn't sure she had the strength. "Oh," she said, and slowly put her book on the table. "I'll... go outside then."

Sirius smirked and, to Ginny's immense disquiet, so did Remus.

She hurried to the front door and smoothed her hair, and was immediately irritated with herself for doing it. She opened the door.

Harry was standing in the garden in the dark, and he looked as uncomfortable as she felt. He came to the bottom of the steps and looked up at her.

He looked so tired.

"I heard that Remus..." he began. "Ron got it from Sirius that..."

"I ruined the Wolfsbane Potion," Ginny said matter-of-factly. "Remus was a full werewolf last night."

Harry blew out a breath. "Is he all right?"

"His leg's broken, he hit his head, he's got bruises and sick stomach, and he nearly ripped all his nails out."

Harry looked aghast, and another wave of guilt washed over Ginny. She had been the cause of all that, no matter what Remus said. The blame was hers. And it was just as well that Harry should know that she wasn't as gifted as everyone had believed. Perhaps it would make him see that her feelings for him had had nothing to do with her Healing powers. They weren't the most amazing powers in the world after all. They failed sometimes.

"Are *you* all right?" he asked more softly, looking up at her with real concern.

Ginny's stomach fluttered. "Yes," she said. But she wasn't sure what else to say, and Harry had already looked away from her and fixed his eyes on the steps. He fiddled with something in his pocket, opened his mouth, shut it, and shook his head.

"Well, I... just wanted to be sure," he said.

So he was leaving already. A wall went up around Ginny's heart. "Thanks for stopping by," she said automatically, and then she remembered something else. "I won't be back to Azkaban."

He glanced up at her. "You won't?"

"No. I'm finished with the dragons until after my N.E.W.T.s."

Harry looked surprised but satisfied, and Ginny crossed her arms. He didn't have to be so happy about it—but then, he was probably just glad she wouldn't be on the broom with Malfoy anymore. Not that she'd been anywhere near Malfoy since Sunday afternoon.

"I wouldn't've had an escort anyway," she muttered. "Malfoy wasn't going to take me up anymore. And—" Ginny hesitated, met Harry's eyes, and forced the words out. "And you might as well know that I went over to Malfoy's house last week. I did a bit more work on him. Just so you know."

Harry's mouth dropped open. "At—at his house?" he said heatedly. "I mean, I overheard when you... and Ron *said* that you... but I didn't think you'd *go*." His eyes flashed. "Ginny, that was really—"

"Stupid," she finished for him. "Yes, I've had a speech from Sirius already. And from Remus."

"Good," Harry muttered, and Ginny couldn't help wondering if he was actually concerned about her, or if he was just angry that she'd seen Malfoy in private. She decided not to try and work it out.

"How did Ron know that I worked on him?"

"Malfoy told him," Harry said, still looking as if he would have liked to give her more of a lecture.

But it was Ginny's turn to gape. "Ron talked to *Malfoy*? Why?"

Harry scratched his head. "Well... Malfoy was arrested and put in Culparrat today. They pulled him right off his dragon, hauled him off and replaced him with a new rider. It was... really something." Harry looked away at nothing, but his eyebrows went up as if he was seeing it happen again, and he pushed up his glasses. "Ron questioned him after that, but I wasn't allowed any of the particulars."

Ginny couldn't fathom it. She stared at Harry for a long time. "Arrested?" she finally repeated.

"Right."

"For... what?"

Harry peered up at her. "I'm not entirely sure." He narrowed his eyes. "But Ron seems to think you might know something about it."

"Me?" Ginny said blankly.

"Seeing as you worked on Malfoy and all. It would make sense if you... knew things." Harry tilted his head a little. "So, do you?"

Ginny was so taken aback that it took her a while to answer. Did she know things? In her mind's eye she saw a flash of gaudy gold marked with an *M*, and she got a terrible feeling in her heart. "I signed a confidentiality contract," she said, when she got her wits back. "I can't... even if I did know, I couldn't." And she didn't know. Not really.

"Right," Harry said again, and looked away from her. "Well. I'd better... get some sleep."

"I'd... better go and study," Ginny replied, wishing she could think of something else. Something that would make him stay, even if she didn't know how to talk to him. It occurred to her that, if she was able to work on a werewolf, then she might be strong enough to open up to Harry. All she needed to do was let her guard down, and she would *know* how he felt. She wouldn't have to guess. He wouldn't have to sort it out for himself.

She wasn't sure why, but she couldn't bring herself to do it.

"Night, then," Harry said, after a minute.

"Goodnight." And, as Ginny watched, Harry turned and walked down the road without looking back.

* * * * *

"Did you want to talk to me?"

The sudden appearance of Ginny's head in the fireplace of their tiny office made Ron tense with surprise. But the sight of his sister was more than welcome; he had been trying to find time to talk to her all weekend, but ever since Remus's transformation she had apparently decided to be a hermit. She was always busy, she wouldn't come over to the Notch—Ron suspected that had more to do with Harry than anything else—and he had finally told Hermione to give her a message.

He wanted to talk to her about Malfoy. Ron strode to the fireplace and crouched down to get her at eye level.

"I have some questions," he said. "Apparate over here."

"I can't, I only have two minutes. Remus is in charge of my schedule until I'm finished with school."

"Are you still in class? It's nearly four o'clock, you must be finished," Ron protested.

"I mean until I'm actually *finished* with school." Ginny gave him a look. "Until I take the N.E.W.T.s. But yes, actually I have to finish a potion. You come over *here*."

"I can't, I'm busy." Ron gestured behind him to Sirius, who was bent low over his desk, half-buried in a sea of papers. "Malfoy doesn't want us to represent him, but we've still got to prepare our—"

"Ron," Sirius said sharply. "Quiet."

Ron sighed loudly. It was harder for him than anyone realized, this secret-keeping business. Not telling things to Hermione and Harry was absolutely excruciating, and not being able to have a candid conversation with his own sister... well, it was just ridiculous. But he wanted Malfoy to stay in prison as much as he wanted the Cannons to win the league—perhaps even more than that—and whatever it took, he would do it.

"Hey, did you really quit Azkaban?" he asked keenly. "Harry said you—"

"Yes." Ginny gazed serenely at him. "I'm not doing any more extracurricular activities until Remus says it's all right—I'm not doing personal work, I'm not going back to Azkaban and I'm not..."

making the Wolfsbane Potion anymore.” She paused, and her eyes flitted over Ron’s shoulder, towards Sirius. “Nothing except for my work on the Grangers.”

Ron raised an eyebrow. She sounded awfully obedient all of a sudden—she must’ve felt really guilty.

“I’m going to be late,” Ginny fretted, turning her head a little and looking away. “Come over later if you want to talk, I’ve got to go.”

“No, wait.” Ron leaned closer to the fire. “Ginny... Malfoy said you were over at his house. And then Harry said it was true—is it true?”

Ginny glanced at him, and her eyes darkened. “Yes, all right?” she finally said, very stiffly. “I went—once. But you’d better save the lecture, I’ve already had three.”

Furious, protective anger surged through Ron, but he fought it down as hard as he could. Ginny never reacted well to being babied, and just now he needed her in her right mind. “What did you see over there—what did you... you know, feel from him?” he asked, half excited at the prospect of finding out something that might seal up his case, and half sickened by the fact that his sister might have any intimate knowledge of Draco Malfoy. “I know there has to be something—what can you tell me?”

“Nothing,” Ginny said simply, and turned her head again. “I signed a contract—look, I really have to go. Sorry. See you.”

“Ginny, wait a minute—”

But her head vanished as abruptly as it had appeared, and Ron was left, chagrined, in front of the empty fireplace. “She can’t just withhold information,” he began, but Sirius interrupted at once.

“Yes she can, and it would compromise our case if she didn’t.”

“But—”

“But? There are certain things we all have to keep quiet, in order to preserve the integrity of our work. Think about what you’ve kept secret.”

“But it’s Malfoy.” Ron stood and straightened his robes, still irritated with Ginny for being so elusive, though he supposed he shouldn’t have asked her anything in the first place. After all, if she had her own professional ethics, then that was a good thing. Sort of. “It’s *Malfoy*,” he repeated, feeling that somehow there should be an exception to the legal rules in cases of hateful, pointy little bastards who deserved to rot for life.

Sirius looked up at him. “I know the feeling, Ron, but that doesn’t change things. And if you really want him, you’ll have to play clean, because I have a feeling that whoever he hires won’t miss the smallest chink in our armor.” He rubbed his head. “And as Ginny’s going to have to stand as a witness in the first hearing, you can tell her absolutely nothing.”

“She’s a witness?” Ron narrowed his eyes. “I thought she signed a contract?”

“Doesn’t matter. The point of the first hearing will be to disprove that she ever *breached* her contract—we’ll have to insure that the evidence against Malfoy cannot be suppressed. Malfoy’s Advocate, I’m sure, will want to prove that Ginny breached her contract, so that everything that was discovered in the raid of Malfoy Manor will have to be struck from the record. That way, Malfoy will have to be released.”

“That’s crap. She never told me anything.”

“And that’s just the way we want it, for now... until we can find a way to nullify that contract.” Sirius sifted through another handful of papers, and he narrowed his eyes at a tiny slip of parchment. “Do me a favor—check the archives for any files the Ministry might have on Galfrid Thinstone.”

“The Hogsmeade jeweler?”

“He comes up in Lucius Malfoy’s receipts again and again. It’s probably nothing, but some of those Dark objects were—”

“Pretty fancy.” Ron frowned. “You’re right. I’ll be right back.”

He left the office with a thick roll of parchment and a couple of Self-Inking quills, and he headed up the wide, polished stairways that led to the Ministry’s top floor, where the archives were located. He was glad they weren’t stuffed away in some rotting basement or shut up in a windowless library—he was here so often that he was grateful for the skylight. He immediately asked Mr. Doyle where he could find information on Galfrid Thinstone—he had learned that, if he only asked, he would get more help than he ever could have dreamed of—and waited as the pensive archivist went off in search of papers.

“Just these,” said Mr. Doyle, returning with a trolley full of books and files, most of which, Ron knew, probably only referenced Galfrid Thinstone in some microscopic way. But just in case... He sighed, laid out his parchment, and with a flick of his wand he set his quills to work in midair. A

few precise words and the books began to turn their own pages as the quills flew rapidly from foot to foot of parchment, making note of everything Thinstone had ever done.

"That's a handy pair of spells," said Mr. Doyle, looking impressed.

"My girlfriend taught me."

"Oh?" Mr. Doyle asked indulgently. "And what does your girlfriend do?"

Ron gave a half-smile. "Oh, nothing much. She's just a book lover, you know..." He paused for effect. "And a Thinker. You've heard of Hermione Granger?"

Mr. Doyle went round-eyed, and Ron bit back a grin. It was always fun, springing Hermione on people. She was impressive even when she wasn't there. And as it was very rare to come across anyone who didn't know that they were dating, Ron basked in the satisfaction of the archivist's obvious awe.

A half-hour was all it took before the notes were complete. Ron rolled up the parchment, thanked Mr. Doyle, and headed back down to his office, detouring only slightly to say hello to his father. He didn't really have time, but his dad had looked more and more frustrated lately—the debates about who would make the most appropriate new Minister still raged among the P.C.s, and Ron sometimes wondered if his father even wanted to be considered for the position any longer.

"Is my dad available?" he asked Lawrence, who opened the door at once.

"There's an emergency meeting—Mr. Weasley, is it all right if—"

His father looked up. "Come in, Ron."

Ron's curiosity was piqued. "Okay..." He hurried into his father's office and his eyebrows went up.

Nearly everyone who headed the P.A.P. was there. Harry, Charlie, Cho Chang and Mick O'Malley stood around the Minister's desk in their dragon gear; Rose Brown hovered anxiously at his father's side with her clipboard; Moody was beside her, looking grim, and even Sirius had been summoned. Lawrence closed the door behind Ron, who joined the rest of them around his father's desk.

"What's going on?" Ron asked, rolling his stack of parchment a little tighter and shoving it into the pocket of his robes. He caught Harry's eyes and immediately wished he hadn't. Harry looked dead on his feet.

"It's the Dementors," Harry said faintly. He didn't look like he was going to be able to stand up much longer.

A horrible chill shot through Ron's heart. "No one's hurt, are they?"

"Not... yet." Harry swayed slightly, and Ron pointed his wand at once, floating a chair towards the desk. Harry sat down in it, looking more than a little embarrassed. But it seemed he had no choice. He leaned back, and it seemed he was only concentrating with incredible effort; his eyes were glazed over.

"They've gone wild," Charlie said grimly. "Out of control. All of them—worse than it was at the beginning. Far worse."

"They're hungrier," Sirius said quietly.

"But that doesn't explain why they've suddenly started shooting out of the prison in hordes," Cho said, pushing a hand through her short hair. "They've been getting hungrier all this time. Why would they snap now, all at once? Why are they suddenly escaping by the dozens? We could hardly turn them back today—it took everyone on shore to keep them at bay, and to be frank, I'm really worried for the people in Stornoway. We need to get people out there—"

"Tonight," Charlie finished. "She's right, Dad. There's no time to waste."

"It's critical," Cho went on. "We don't even have time for this meeting, we need help right *now*."

Ron listened. He had a lot of questions, but he had a feeling that they would be answered if he just paid attention, and everyone seemed so worried and afraid that he didn't want to break their focus.

"Could it be the new rider?" Arthur rubbed his chin. "Is he honestly prepared to be out there, or did you give him the position too soon?"

"What, Joe?" Charlie snorted. "We've been putting him through the wringer for months, he's a fine dragon rider. Hasn't missed a beat, has he, Harry?"

Harry shook his head.

"Granted, he's only been out there for five days—"

"It's not Joe." Harry let out a tired breath. "He's doing far better than I am."

"Harry..." Cho began.

"No, he is," Harry said matter-of-factly. "He's the best of us right now. He has more energy than the rest of us because he hasn't been out there."

Mick shrugged. "True enough." He looked exhausted too. "He made up for the two of us today. Let's not put the blame on Joe."

"Is it Ginny's absence?" Arthur leaned back in his chair and looked around at all of them. "She came to me on Friday night and turned in her Ministry badge. She said that she has no intention of returning to work until she's completed her studies, and I agree that it's probably the wisest thing..."

"But if we need her," Rose said, "then we need her."

Harry sat up straighter, and his eyes gained back some of their focus. "It's not Ginny," he said. "This has nothing to do with the dragons. Norbert was better behaved today than he's been in months—she did her job."

"Vikings in great shape too," Mick put in.

"The dragons are perfectly healthy." Cho shrugged. "But if it isn't Joe and it isn't Ginny, then I don't know what's caused this sudden shift."

"Well, you're all blind as bats." Moody's callous interruption got all their attention at once; several heads turned towards him as he crossed his arms and humphed. "Or else you just don't want to name the truth, and I can't say I blame you, but honestly. A bunch of intelligent officials like yourselves, ignoring the obvious answer. What's the world coming to?"

Everyone was silent, and Ron met Sirius's eyes. He had a feeling that he knew what was coming, and he was sure that he had no desire to hear it.

"Malfoy." Moody eyed each one of them in turn. "He was arrested on Thursday?"

"That's right." Arthur pushed back what little hair he had.

Moody nodded. "And since his arrest, the Dementors have gone wild, as you put it, Mr. Weasley."

Charlie shrugged. "I suppose, but Malfoy could hardly have been responsible for—"

"I'm not going to jump to conclusions either way." Moody's magic eye rolled across each of their faces. "I'm just pointing out the facts. Malfoy was there, and the Dementors were controlled. Malfoy's gone, and the Dementors are rushing to shore in massive groups."

Harry slumped back again. "Bring Malfoy back then," he muttered.

"Hell no," Ron said, before he'd thought about it.

They all turned to look at him, and Ron's ears went hot.

"I just mean—you know—" he stammered. "He's got to stand trial first. We're not just sending him back out there a free man, not until he's proven he deserves it."

"And how could it have been Malfoy?" Charlie demanded. "It's not like he was there twenty-four hours a day, he went home at night. If it was something he was doing, then the Dementors would have gone mental every time he left."

"How did they behave on Friday?" Moody countered. "Is there a log book?"

"Well, yeah..." Charlie scratched his head and Cho pulled the log book out of her rucksack.

"Friday saw a slight increase in Dementor activity, but nothing *too* out of the ordinary..." she mused, turning pages. "Saturday... was worse. Yesterday was bad—we saw a few big groups trying to escape and we weren't sure what was causing it. But today was absolutely out of control."

"So if Malfoy *was* doing something, it might have worn off by now?" Harry looked up at Moody, who shrugged.

"I don't have answers, Potter," he said. "Just observations."

Mick rolled his head from side to side, and his neck cracked. "Well, I'm not sorry Malfoy's gone," he said bluntly. "But I'll tell you, if today is any indication of what it's going to be like out there from now on, then we're going to need all the help we can get. Harry nearly—"

Harry's head snapped up and he glared at Mick.

"Harry nearly what?" Sirius said, stepping forward. "Go on."

Mick gave Harry an apologetic glance, then fixed his attention on Arthur. "I lost contact with him for about a minute, at the end of our shift," he said. "So I told Joe to keep an eye on both my section and his, and I flew around to Harry's side of the island." He shook his head. "I can't tell you what happened. All I know is that I saw Norbert getting very close to the water—it looked like he was driving back a group of about four Dementors all on his own."

"Harry wasn't *on* him?" Sirius demanded.

"Oh, he was on him." Mick gave a weak laugh. "Lying flat across his harness on his stomach. It looked like... well, I can't be sure. I only know what I saw. But it looked like Norbert had just caught him from a fall."

Ron looked at Harry in alarm, and was unsurprised to see that his friend's face had become an emotionless mask.

"Harry," Sirius said, his voice shaking. "Is that true?"

Harry kept his mouth shut.

"Harry," Ron began, but Harry shot him a look so venomous that Ron could not continue.

It was Arthur who got his attention. "Harry, you need to explain to me what Mick saw," he said, in a quiet voice that Ron knew very well. It was a voice that always got an answer, no matter how difficult the question was. It had worked on all of them for as long as Ron could remember, and it was doing its magic on Harry now; Harry drew back in his chair but his mouth opened slightly.

"It wasn't anything," he began, but Arthur raised his eyebrows and Harry went silent.

"You won't jeopardize your peers, Harry," he said. "You won't put me in a position where I'm forced to make a decision without crucial information. Will you."

Harry shook his head and dropped his gaze. "I..." He rubbed his eyes. "All right. I passed out."

Sirius drew a sharp breath and took another, manic step towards him.

"Sirius." Arthur's voice was hard. "Not now. Go on, Harry. What exactly happened?"

"There were... there had to be ten of them. I would've called for help, but I didn't think it would be a problem." He laughed, and the sound was somewhat mad. It made Ron's skin crawl. "I mean, I've done better." Harry laughed again. "I used a Patronus, but it didn't work on all of them. There were still three coming towards me, and I raised my wand, but I couldn't say the words." His breath came quickly. He kept his eyes on his knees. "I could hear... in my head. Things I couldn't get away from."

The room was terribly still, and Ron wasn't sure whom to look at: Harry, who was at this moment incredibly vulnerable, or the rest of them, who were watching in shock as Harry came apart.

"I didn't have anything left," Harry said. "And they just came closer. I tried to get away, I tried to get out of my harness, but before I could grab my broom..." He gripped his knees. "It all went black."

Ron was strongly reminded of third year, and of watching, terrified and unable to help, as Harry had gone unconscious and plummeted towards the hooded beings on the Quidditch pitch.

"And you fell?" Arthur asked, though his voice was not as steady as it had been a moment ago.

"I don't know," Harry said. "I think so. When I came to, I was lying on my stomach, on my harness. I heard Mick calling for me, but I just had enough energy to climb back in and buckle up."

"And how did you get onto your stomach?"

"I can't remember. But I think..." Now Harry looked up. He shrugged at Charlie. "I think Norbert caught me. I know he drove off the last of the Dementors on his own. You were... right about dragons."

Charlie looked torn between horror and joy.

Ron was only horrified. And it was clear, from the anguished expression on Sirius's face, that he was not the only one who felt that way.

"Harry," Rose said shakily. "Why didn't you tell Mick? Or anyone?"

Harry blinked at her. "What good would it have done?"

"You could have gone to shore—you could have been replaced—"

"No I couldn't." Harry gave another unhinged sort of laugh. "Replaced? There's no one else ready to be out there. *Please* replace me, if that's an option."

Ron's mouth dropped open. Had he ever heard Harry demand help like that? He tried to think of a time. He drew a blank.

"It's not an option," Charlie said faintly, after a moment. "There are two other riders in training, and they'll be ready in... Harry, it'll be weeks. At least. I can't in good conscience put them out there until—well, possibly by May, but—"

"*May?*" Sirius rounded on Charlie. "May? Did you *hear him?*"

Charlie stood up straight. "It's May," he said stoutly. "Or it's bring back Malfoy."

Moody gave a gruff bark of a laugh. "Bringing Malfoy back isn't an option at the moment," he said. "So we'll send reinforcements to shore. That should take the pressure off the riders. I'll spare what Aurors I can tonight, and they'll stay out there until you can replace them, Arthur. Until then, Black, your trials will have to wait, and so will the Imprisonment Enchantment, because there won't be enough of my people at Culparrat."

Sirius and Ron exchanged a dark look, but before anyone could protest, Moody was already talking again.

"There aren't enough Aurors to patrol Culparrat and Azkaban at once, and Azkaban is now the clear priority. But Arthur, that can't last. I need those people to serve in other capacities. You'll have to replace them."

"How?" Rose demanded.

Moody shrugged. "Hire as many wizards as are willing to protect the shoreline along the camp—and on the island itself, to stop the Dementors from ever hitting the water. And then I recommend you speak to Diggory and station Enforcers around Stornoway until something else can be done."

Rose made a noise of dismay. "We can't afford to hire new staff," she said.

"We can't afford not to," Arthur said quietly. "All right, Moody. I appreciate your input. I'll... speak to Diggory and the Privy Council straight away and see what arrangements can be made. But for tonight—"

"Tonight you'll have the Aurors."

"And what about tomorrow?" Sirius burst out. "Containing them isn't good enough—look at these riders, Arthur, consider what happened today. Another solution *must be found*. I've been saying all year—"

"I know it," Arthur said, and gave a weary laugh. "But we've pooled our ideas time and time again, and no solution has presented itself. What would you have me do? Is there new information? Some way to destroy them that we have overlooked?"

Sirius opened his mouth, glanced at Ron, and then shut his mouth again in a tight line. He was quiet for a moment.

"I'll take that as a no," Arthur said gently. "I'm sorry, Harry, but our options are so limited at the moment that we—"

"Wait. There's a spell." Sirius put a hand up to stave off the questions that had already formed on everyone's lips. "Not a working spell, nothing we've ever used. It's something Hermione Granger developed that I've been working with on my own, and I want to test it."

Harry looked up at him, hope obvious in his face.

"On the Dementors?" Arthur said doubtfully. "What exactly is the spell?"

"The one she used on her parents," Sirius said. "The one that sucked the pain out of them. I've adjusted it to suck the life force out of the Dementors. To drain them of their energy."

"You've... adjusted?" Arthur frowned. "Has any licensed spellcrafter worked on it? Has any Thinker approved it? Has Hermione—"

"Just me. And I want to test it," Sirius repeated. "All right? This is an emergency, and we should exhaust every possible avenue before we choose to send these riders up there again to be preyed upon—"

"I agree." Arthur folded his hands on the desk. "Whatever this spell is, leave the plans with me, or meet with me immediately after I speak to the Council—and Diggory. Tonight, if you can stay."

"I'll stay. But the Council and Diggory can only provide you with temporary relief," Sirius said desperately. "It's high time to strike at the root issue—"

"And if your spell is the way towards that, then I'll be thrilled." Arthur took a deep breath. "But though the root issue is ultimately more important, there are immediate issues that must be addressed. The safety of the residents of Stornoway and the enhancement of security around Azkaban must be dealt with first. Perhaps they are surface problems, but right now they need our attention."

Sirius made a noise of impotent fury.

"That's all, for the moment." Arthur looked around the room. "Thank you for giving me this information so quickly."

Charlie nodded. "We've got to get back up there, Dad," he said. "See you." He and Cho headed for the door.

"I should get back up there too," Harry mumbled, standing up on shaking legs. "There aren't enough people."

"Harry, mate." Mick put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't be stupid. You're barely making sense. Go home and sleep before you get yourself half-killed again tomorrow."

Looking glad of the direction, Harry stumbled out of the office.

"Go with him," Sirius said, looking slightly deranged and pointing at Ron. "I have to stay, and he needs help."

Ron was well aware of it. He handed his archival notes to Sirius and followed Harry out of the building, tailing him until they were both on the Ministry steps. "Sure you're up to Apparating?" he asked.

Harry gave him a dazed sort of look. "Huh?"

"Right." Ron took him by the elbow and steered him toward the Leaky Cauldron. "Floo powder it is. Want a drink first, Harry?"

Harry laughed weakly. "Yeah, right."

Ron glanced sideways at Harry as an idea occurred to him. "You know," he said, "it's none of my business. But you look like hell, and you almost got yourself..." Ron couldn't bear to finish the sentence. The idea of Dementors bearing down on Harry and trying to make a meal of him was more than Ron could stand. "If you're going back out there again tomorrow, then you'll need to be in better shape than this."

"Sleep," Harry mumbled. "That'll help. And food."

"Or Ginny could help," Ron said honestly. "And she'd do it. I don't care how tidy she wants to make her schedule, she'd do anything for you." They were strange words to say. But they were true.

Harry stopped cold. "Tidy?" he said softly. "What do you mean?"

Ron waved the question off. "Oh, you know. She's upset with herself for what happened to Remus and she says she isn't going to do any more Healing until she's finished with school."

"Not even the Grangers?" Harry asked, lifting his head and pushing up his glasses. "Really? I find that hard to—"

"Just the Grangers, she said. But nothing else." Ron studied Harry's face. He looked like he'd been run over by a dragon, rather than saved by one. "Go and tell her what's happened, and let her help."

"No." Harry looked ahead, down the road. "And don't you tell her either." He reached up and rubbed his own neck.

Ron looked at him in irritation. Always noble, always self-sacrificing—Harry was really a pain in the arse. "You're an idiot if you don't go to her," he said hotly. "Anyone else in the world would kill to have a Healer to help them, and here you are, and you've got her, and she's right up the bloody road, and you're acting like—"

"You don't get it," Harry said. His voice was barely audible, but there was such helplessness in it that the rest of Ron's tirade froze on his tongue. "I *don't* have her, all right?" Harry turned away. His eyes were suddenly red, and so was his face, and he looked disgusted with himself. "Drop it, just *drop* it." He tried to stride off ahead of Ron, but he stumbled and had to take a moment to catch his balance.

Ron forgot about Ginny. He forgot about the Dementors. He forgot about Culparrat, and Aurors, and Malfoy. He forgot about his job as a Defender, and he stepped up beside Harry, deciding that the rest of it could wait. What mattered was getting Harry back to the Notch in one piece—this had been his first job, really. And, he realized vaguely, as he tossed a bit of Floo powder into the ramshackle fireplace of the Leaky Cauldron and pushed Harry into the flames, this was probably a job he was going to have for life.

He didn't mind.

* * * * *

"Back again, Black?" Alastor Moody's tendency to sneak up in silence always made Sirius jump.

"Back again," Sirius said, not moving his eyes from the elaborate model of Azkaban in front of him, through which the Peeping Charm was activated. He didn't mind being startled by Moody; he knew that his lack of self-defense drove the old Auror mad. It usually amused him. But since the Ministry meeting a week ago, Sirius had taken to spending most of his time at Culparrat, and there was little he found amusing.

No one seemed to think it odd that he had spent more time at the prison this week than in his office, and he was glad that no one had questioned him. Remus probably would have, if he had known about it—Remus was always suspicious of any abrupt change in Sirius's behavior. He was far too wise that way. But Remus was busy with Ginny; the two of them had been deep in study ever since the failed Wolfsbane Potion. And Ron was so absorbed in preparing Malfoy's case that he didn't seem troubled by what Sirius was up to.

Sirius smiled grimly. It had been a while since he had got away with anything of this magnitude—not that that was the point. This was... well... serious. This was something that *had* to happen, and it couldn't wait another moment. Other people were unable to give time to it right now, but that wasn't going to stop him. Not anymore. This had required attention for nearly a year—he couldn't believe that no one had done anything about it. He couldn't stand to see Harry looking the way he had looked in Arthur's office last week. He *wouldn't* stand it.

He had waited a week, in order to plan his attack. He had also waited in the hopes that Arthur and the rest of the Ministry officials would quickly turn their attention to the heart of the trouble. But since he had presented the spell to Arthur, nothing had been done. They were all occupied with the wrong things—no one would pay heed to what Sirius *knew* was the first priority. The Dementors had been allowed to run rampant long enough. They had wasted enough resources, enough time, and enough lives. Something had to be done. Right now. And if no one else was going to do it...

Moody moved to stand across the room from Sirius, viewing the model of Azkaban from the opposite side. "The dragons haven't failed yet," he said. "Seems Ginny Weasley worked a miracle there. But the Dementors are still mad as pixies."

"Except for these," Sirius said, pointing to a group of three Dementors standing in Azkaban's main guard station, a small hut that was connected to the castle by an underground corridor so that it seemed separate. "They've stayed in there all week."

"That's why there's only one wizard guarding that section at the moment," Moody ran his finger along the island's shoreline. "The worst concentrations seem to be around the main entrance hall and the old kitchens, but they haven't done any damage. It was a good move on the Council's part to approve the reinforcements. None of the Dementors have made it past the dragon camp, and no one's been hurt."

"It's still a miserable situation," said Sirius, watching as a Patronus in the form of a waterfall cascaded toward the prison. "This is a ridiculous system. One of them *will* slip by, and someone else will be Kissed—it's only a matter of time."

"And not much time at that," Moody agreed. "Well. Since you've been spending so much time in here analyzing things, have you noticed whether or not they appear to be eating anything? There's no possibility that we could just starve them to death, is there?"

"I think," said Sirius, bending even closer to the model, "that there is enough residual human emotion in Azkaban to keep them well-fed for centuries."

"Pity that. But this Ravenclaw spying charm is excellent, isn't it?" Moody said, walking back around to survey the map with Sirius.

"It's unsettling," Sirius said. "I always thought Ravenclaw girls were prudes, and all the while they were probably watching me shower. Lucky little tarts."

Moody threw back his head and laughed. "Ah, Black. It's always the quiet ones, isn't it?"

Sirius smirked. "It most certainly is... Shouldn't one of these maps be set up at the dragon camp?"

"Tomorrow," said Moody, the sound of his wooden leg resounding as he headed towards the door. "This one was the test model. Now that she's got it working, Miss Chang's going to duplicate it up at Azkaban in the morning." He snorted. "Unless you can work out how to get rid of the Dementors before then."

Sirius started. "What do you mean?" he asked, but he sounded guilty even to himself. Had he been that obvious? Did Moody know what he planned to do?

"Did you think you were being subtle?" Moody narrowed his good eye at him. "I know what you're on about, Black, and I'm on your side. They need destroying. Just don't do anything foolish."

Sirius forced a smile. "I won't," he said lightly, and picked up his things. He pulled his wand. "Well then. Back to work."

"And me." Moody stumped out of the room, grumbling about retirement and how he planned to take the Ministry up on it any day now.

Sirius waited until Moody was out of earshot and then quickly left the prison—but he didn't go back to the Ministry. He walked away from Culparrat and down the rocky shore of the bay to where he wouldn't splinch. When it was safe, he Apparated to the shore line opposite Azkaban, and steeled his mind, going once more over the plan he had made. He knew it wasn't entirely rational, but most people thought he was deranged anyway, and sometimes he thought he might as well live up to their expectations.

And the Dementors were destroying Harry. It was his job as godfather to put an end to that. It disturbed him to see James's eighteen-year-old son look older than James had ever been. It disturbed him to see Harry's white hairs and his ashen face every time they spent five minutes together. It disturbed him to know that his godson's soul had almost been sucked out last week by creatures that were apparently unstoppable. But nothing was unstoppable—*nothing*. He had escaped Azkaban. He had seen Voldemort destroyed. The Ministry had pardoned him. Nothing was impossible, save bringing back the dead, and Sirius was tired of waiting.

Standing on an isolated outcropping in front of the P.A.P. headquarters, Sirius squinted out to sea. The weather was terrible—he shivered and quickly cast a Warming Spell over himself—though he was glad for the thick fog and the light drizzle. It would be much easier to avoid being seen, in this weather. His only worry was that the perimeter of the prison was bathed in charmed light that extended several hundred meters out to sea. The light made it easier for the dragon riders to spot Dementors, but it would also make Sirius's plan more difficult to execute.

But he had come prepared. Sirius shrugged his rucksack off his shoulder and reached into it. He had considered bringing the Invisibility Cloak, but somehow, the thought had unsettled him; instead, he pulled out an old set of robes that he had found in the attic of Lupin Lodge. They had,

most likely, belonged to Remus' grandfather, and although they were ripped and torn in several places, the fabric was strong. More importantly, they were gray, too big for him, and had an enormous hood.

He slipped the robes over his head, revulsion sweeping him as he did so. He had to remind himself several times that they were just old robes and nothing more, but he was chilled to the bone by his choice of costume. Still, if he did his job properly, he wouldn't have to wear them for long.

Taking a deep breath, Sirius put his broom carefully on the ground, next to his rucksack, and then, slipping his wand inside his robes, transformed into Padfoot. This would be the easy part. He'd swum this route once before as Padfoot, and as long as the dragon riders' attention stayed focused on the things that were *leaving* Azkaban, they probably wouldn't have occasion to notice a relatively small, very dark canine swimming towards the prison.

It would be far more difficult to remain hidden once he reached the guard station on the prison shore. But after several mornings of observing the model of Azkaban at Culparrat, Sirius had learned that the guards along Azkaban's shoreline changed shifts at three o'clock, and that there were three Dementors that seemed never to leave the guard station. Sirius had never imagined that he would be glad to know the habits of Dementors, but the three in the guard station were ideal for his purposes. They were fairly stationary and entirely contained, and it was on them that Sirius planned to try his own version of Hermione's Weeping Spell.

The Warming Spell that he had cast over himself only dulled the chill of the water, and Padfoot shivered as he began to paddle towards the shore, making sure to keep his head low. It would have been much quicker to fly to the shore, but the new guards and the dragon staff had been warned not to let anyone near the island, and he wasn't going to take any chances. Padfoot paddled harder, swallowing salt water and spitting it out again, remembering far too clearly the last time he had done this. The memory made him feel suddenly invincible.

He had escaped this place. He had escaped these creatures. Azkaban had been his unwilling home for twelve long years. And if he bloody well wanted to pay it a visit, then no one in the world had a right to stop him.

* * * * *

"Expecto Patronum!"

"All right there, Harry?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Harry watched a pair of Dementors race back towards the prison. Panting with effort, he slicked back his sweaty hair with a gloved hand and tilted up his face to feel the wind, glad that it was a cool April.

He tried to imagine a time when he hadn't been riding Norbert on a daily basis, but found it difficult. If this were last year, then he'd be sitting in Potions right about now, cutting up insects that he'd never have to look at ever again for some disgusting concoction that he'd have to drink. The fact that Snape would never be able to force him to drink a potentially dangerous potion ever again made Harry oddly sad.

He couldn't say that dragon riding was boring. In many ways, it was much better than school. No homework, for example. And when he went home at night, he could read whatever he wanted, or play chess with Ron, or listen to Quidditch, or visit with Sirius and plot future adventures—though he hadn't been over to Lupin Lodge at all in the past few weeks. The only problem was that he had to wake up at five in the morning, and if he didn't fall into bed the night before by ten o'clock at the very latest, then he'd go through the rest of the day in a half-awake daze. But getting to bed by ten hadn't really been an issue lately. It wasn't like he'd had anyone important keeping him awake.

She'd looked so tired last week. Harry's mind wandered back again to their conversation—the only one they'd had in nearly a month—and he saw her again in her work robes, standing still at the top of the steps with quiet defeat written all over her face. Harry wasn't sure why it had made him want to hold her—perhaps because she had seemed, for a moment, to actually *need* him. He wasn't sure if that was true, but he had a feeling that if he had just walked up the steps and hugged her like he'd wanted to, it might have solved a lot of problems.

Or perhaps it wouldn't. Whether they had hugged or not, she would probably want to know why he had shouted all those horrible things at her—things about Malfoy, and about her family and his, and about the cupboard under the stairs... Harry grimaced. And she would definitely want to know how he felt about her; she'd made that very clear. Harry restlessly fingered the letter in his pocket, but he shook his head for the hundredth time and withdrew his hand. He just wasn't ready. He wondered how he would know when he was. He wondered if Ginny would still be there for him when he decided what to say. Perhaps she was already gone—but he couldn't entertain that idea. It made him feel so empty that he ached.

"Eleven of them! Eleven! Ha ha! Top that!" Mick voice sounded again in Harry's ear. He patrolled the stretch of sky that saw the most Dementor activity, but he somehow kept his spirits up.

"Remind me to get your autograph at the end of this shift," Harry said. "I've already got Krum's."

"Shut up, Potter, or I'll ask for yours." Mick was as tired as he was, and Harry knew it, but it was somehow important to keep up the jokes. "What's your record today?"

"All at once?" Harry asked, feeling a bit useless. "Three."

"Joe?"

"Er-seven," Joe said, and his grin was audible.

Harry still wasn't used to the new dragon rider's voice. He kept expecting to hear Malfoy, and it was jarring to have normal conversations with a decent person after so many months of that obnoxious sneer.

"Seems I'm the man, then," said Mick, laughing, and the Communication Charm crackled out.

In truth, Harry was glad that he hadn't been the one to turn back eleven Dementors. He never wanted to see that many in one place again, and he was grateful that there hadn't been another dangerous episode like last week's. Dozens of wizard guards around the prison and on the shoreline of the dragon camp made things far more bearable. Still horrible... but bearable. In fact, in some ways, work had actually been better since Malfoy's arrest. Not seeing Malfoy's pointed face in the mornings made Harry's toast digest easier, and not having to listen to his suggestive jeers about Ginny was a definite plus. Even the absence of his shiny red dragon was somehow encouraging—the Ministry had taken Mordor to Wales for observation, and the dragon keepers there had reported that he seemed to miss his master, which led Harry to wonder whether Malfoy had been singing lullabies to his dragon during his shifts.

"Want a hand, Harry?" Joe asked suddenly.

Harry steered Norbert around and looked down at the island. "I don't think so," he said. "Keep an eye out, though."

A cluster of Dementors hovered not far from one of the Azkaban docks. Harry flew in close and made Norbert circle them in the air a few times. The wizards on the island's shore could only help if they could get in front of the Dementors and drive them back towards the castle, and this group was already too far out. The docks were isolated, rickety, and narrow, and Harry could see a witch standing at the end closest to the prison, having arrived too late to precede the Dementors on the dock.

Instead of running inside for cover, the Dementors scattered as Harry flew over them. Three went to his left and two to his right.

"Damn!" he muttered, looking quickly right and left. He had just decided to go left when an enormous, silvery waterfall appeared to that side of him, driving the Dementors away. Harry steered Norbert to the right and sent the remaining two Dementors scurrying up the dock to the prison.

"Thanks, Joe," Harry shouted as Joe and his Welsh Green, Tardionius, gracefully pulled up from the water. It didn't surprise Harry that Joe was the only person who had so far passed Charlie's battery of tests—he had previously been a Seeker for the Sumbawanga Sunrays, so his flying skills were unquestionable, and he seemed fearless where dragons and Dementors were concerned.

"There's more—" Joe called back, pointing. "Got them?"

"Yeah." Another group of Dementors had slipped past the guards and slipped out across the water, towards the shore. Harry pushed Norbert into a dive, raised his wand, and summoned his brightest thought.

Ginny. He wasn't sure why she was still the first face to come into his mind, but she was, and a sliver of joy sliced through the fog of his fatigue and made him capable again. "*Expecto Patronum!*" he cried, and Prongs galloped forward, full and fast.

Harry sat back, watched the Dementors glide miserably back into the prison, and idly wondered if there were substitutes for "I love you." If there were words that meant the same thing, and didn't taste so strange in his mouth. Not that it would be any easier to say "You're the source of my Patronus"—he winced at the very idea. Might as well give her the pink princess hat as say something that stupid.... No, there had to be something else. Something comfortable and normal and not so frightening.

But what it was, Harry couldn't imagine.

* * * * *

Padfoot's hind legs grazed something hard and rocky, and he realized that he'd reached the island. Allowing his belly to rest on the rocks, he kept his head just far enough above water to sniff the air around him. There was a person close by. Very close. To his right. Before he even had a chance to

look, he ducked his head under the water, afraid of being seen, and tried to float to his left. Bringing his head up for air a moment later, he groped along the shoreline until he found a small crevice, and he pulled himself up further, hiding behind a rock.

The man was standing just outside the old Azkaban guard station. He was humming. Panting, Padfoot pressed closer to the rocks. He sniffed, and surveyed the area in front of him. It would be possible for him to crawl along the top of the rocks, and then climb in through the old window in the back of the guard station. If he timed it right, he could approach at the same time as the replacement guard, and then it wouldn't matter so much if he made a bit of noise.

Slowly, Padfoot inched his way to the top of the rock he'd been using as a shelf, and flattened himself on the cold, wet stone. He didn't know what time it was, but he expected he had a few minutes to spare before three o'clock. It was difficult to tell without the benefit of sunshine.

The old guard station building was small. It looked much smaller, even to Padfoot, than it had to Sirius back at Culparrat. It looked bleak and cold and inhospitable, and he could remember the first time that he had seen it, as a young man in chains. The day that he'd thought he'd killed Peter Pettigrew. The day he knew he'd killed James and Lily.

"Oi! *Expecto Patronum!*" The guard's voice made Padfoot jump, and he almost rolled off of his rock. He recovered himself just in time to see the doors to the guard station open. Two of the three Dementors who never left glided out towards the space where the guard was standing.

"*Expecto Patronum! Expecto Patronum!*" The third Dementor slithered out to join its companions, and Padfoot could smell the guard's fear as nothing but a loosely-formed wisp of smoke emerged from his wand.

Why had they put such an incompetent guard out here, alone, to guard the Dementors? Most likely because these three had been so quiet for so long. Padfoot inched along, fighting the urge to transform into Sirius, who would be able to help. Or would he? No, Sirius could be no help to this man in fighting the Dementors. His best option was to remain as Padfoot, and, if anything, charge towards the man and carry him away from the creatures. It would sabotage the plan, but even Padfoot knew that this man's soul was more important.

He stood on all fours and began to run towards the guard station, but skidded to a halt when another man, on a broom, swooped in to land.

"Jeremy!" said the young wizard, relief evident in his voice. "*Expecto Patronum!*" And with that, the wizard finally made a Patronus strong enough to drive the Dementors back inside.

"Thought you could use the help, Steve," said Jeremy. "Go and grab some lunch—I'll look after things until you get back."

"I had it under control," mumbled Steve. He trudged across the rocks, towards the place where he'd stashed his broomstick, and gave a sudden scream of fright.

Jeremy ran across the rocks to where Steve was standing and Padfoot used the opportunity to position himself beside the window to the guardhouse. He'd climb through it as soon as there was an opportunity.

"It's a bone!"

"It's not a bone, you idiot—it's a shell."

"Looks like a bone to me. Isn't it true that they didn't bury the prisoners when they died—just threw them into the water? My Uncle Sidney came out here on official business once, and said he saw them doing it."

"Your *uncle* Sidney? That's a girl's name!"

"No it's not!"

"It is. And haven't you explored the place at all? There's a graveyard to the north—some of the prisoners were buried right here. I expect it depended on who they were."

Padfoot could smell something rotting from inside the tiny building. He didn't want to transform. But if he was going to try this spell, now was the time.

As the two guards continued to banter, Padfoot transformed. Sirius stretched his back and felt suddenly very exposed. He was a man, and he was on this shore for the first time in... almost six years. Not even half the time he'd spent here. The fact that he wasn't in danger of being kept here for the rest of his life did very little to relieve the bizarre, irrational panic that seized his heart. Azkaban. He could smell it—*taste* it. He had come up here several times since last summer, but he had always stayed on the shore, near the dragon camp. He had never come back to the prison. Had he been mad to think that he could stand it? His whole body hurt, and his brain threatened to sink under some terrible, invisible weight. Forgetting what he had come for, Sirius stood paralyzed for several seconds, unable to control his fear.

But he couldn't let it get to him—he *couldn't*. He was here to destroy the Dementors for good

and for all, to rid the world of them. To spare Harry the pain of being near them. But more than that—*more than that*—he was here to obliterate them so that he would know, in the pit of his soul, that they would never find him again. Never keep him cold and haunted and shivering in agony in the corner of a cell, unable to fight, unable to concentrate. He wanted them gone. Dead. Forever. He had never realized the depths of his desire, but stepping foot on this god-forsaken shore brought his fury to life. His fury and his terror, and his loss. His unbearable, unsalvageable loss.

If magic was truly a manifestation of will, as Dumbledore had told him many times, then this was going to work.

He didn't dare look towards the sky, where the dragons were circling; Harry might recognize his face. If the riders noticed his hood from above, he wanted them to think he was a Dementor. Grasping his wand in one hand, Sirius pushed the window open with his other. Paint crumbled from the rotting wood into his hand, and he brushed it off on his robes. His head started to pound. He could feel them now. He knew too much about the way they worked—he knew that they could sense him. Knew that they wanted what he could give them. He stood frozen to the ground, already paralyzed by their presence.

Fight it. You've fought it before.

But it was impossible to stop the shadows of the past. They crept forward from the corners where he so carefully kept them, spilling from the tight, dark places at the back of his mind and making pictures in his consciousness. Lily and James. Hagrid. Peter. The sounds of maddened prisoners all around him, wailing like infants, begging for their freedom. For relief.

You are not a prisoner any longer.

It didn't matter. The Dementors had a hold on him so deep that he was overwhelmed by their proximity; he leaned against the outside of the guard hut and groaned.

"If you're going to be sick, Black, then do it in the other direction." Snape's voice had been not-at-all comforting as Sirius had bent over, feeling like he might retch on the silent Hogwarts lawns. *"I suppose that being trusted with a duty of this magnitude makes you nauseated."*

"I'll tell you what makes me nauseated," Sirius had rasped, balancing his hands on his knees and trying not to vomit. He couldn't believe that Minerva had partnered him with Snape to guard the castle perimeter, while Remus had been sent with Arthur towards the Forbidden Forest. It had been the day of Harry's commencement—Voldemort's final opportunity to fulfill his promise that he would kill him at Hogwarts before he left school—and every member of the Order had prepared to be summoned at the slightest disturbance. The only disturbance Sirius felt had been physical... but the sensations had been disturbingly familiar.

"I'm not ill, I—" Sirius had stopped and his stomach had hitched. He had heaved once, but nothing had come out.

"Charming." Snape had taken several steps away in obvious distaste. *"She should have paired me with the werewolf. You're clearly going to be useless."*

"I'm dizzy."

"My sympathies."

Sirius had stood up and glared at him, ignoring the pain in his gut. *"Look, you stupid bastard, I'm not ill. I have a... strong feeling..."* His throat had gone dry and he had fought for balance. *"Dementors,"* he had finally said. *"Nearby."*

Snape had pulled his wand and peered down the lawns, towards the gates. *"They're here then,"* he said softly. He did not look afraid. *"I wondered if he would make good on his word to do it here."*

"He's not going to do anything here," Sirius had said vehemently, trying to ignore the horrible, clammy feeling that had settled on his skin.

"Oh, but he is." A cold smile had flickered across Snape's hook-nosed face. *"Win or lose, there will be... significant damage."* He had looked almost satisfied, and his fingers had clenched more tightly around his wand. *"You are certain you sense the Dementors?"*

Sirius forced himself into the present. He sensed the Dementors here and now, and if he didn't keep his wits about him, they would take him by surprise. Twelve years had practiced him in the art of keeping sane by clinging to one thought—one truth—and he had to do it now. Had to find something to wrap his consciousness around. For years it had been his innocence, and then, at the end, he had narrowed his mind to think only of Peter. Peter and Harry. The desire to destroy Peter and protect Harry. For months he had repeated one mantra, and that focus, however mad it had been, had saved him from sinking into oblivion.

"He's at Hogwarts," Sirius whispered now—any thought to get his strength back—and his mouth moved effortlessly around the familiar words. "He's at Hogwarts, he's at Hogwarts..." A strange sort of relief came almost at once; protecting Harry was the right thought. Keeping his mind on Harry would make this possible—Sirius concentrated his energy on that. He was here for Harry. This was his duty. To test this spell, to prove that it was ready for use so that the Ministry would use it, and to end the half-lives of the creatures who kept Harry from beginning his life. James and Lily had given their lives to ensure their son's survival, but survival wasn't good enough. They would have wanted him to *live*.

Quickly, before he could lose his energy, Sirius went over the spell in his head and conjured the map in his brain. *It will only take a minute*, he reminded himself. If he cast the spell quickly, then he wouldn't have to suffer long.

Several yards away on the rocks, two guards continued to argue about shells and bones on the Azkaban shore. They did not notice when Sirius Black climbed through the window and disappeared into the guard station.

* * * * *

Harry's stomach grumbled and he reached into his pocket for the cheese sandwich he'd made that morning. He finished it in three mouthfuls and reached into his other pocket for the bag of pumpkin crisps. *Just one more hour*, he reminded himself, yawning. His body seemed to be full of cement; he wanted nothing more than to slump back in his harness and pass out. But he could hold his eyes open for one more hour.

Another Dementor came gliding forth from the direction of Joe's skyscape, but Joe was over by Mick, helping him with the throng of Dementors who had decided to take advantage of the guards' shift change. Harry sent Norbert into a dive towards the Dementor, glad that there was only one. It was odd though—Dementors didn't usually come through the doors near the guard station—and upon closer inspection, Harry realized that it wasn't the only one, after all. There were several others hovering along the shore, their hoods turned towards the guard station. They were not moving towards the water, however, and Harry was grateful for that. He swooped closer to the one that was escaping and gathered his strength for another Patronus.

Norbert's energy alone was enough to send the Dementor gliding backwards to the guard station. Harry didn't even have to raise his wand. Norbert gave a mighty snort, as if he knew that he had done something right, and Harry had to smile through his exhaustion. He thought he was probably as fond of Norbert as Hagrid had been, and he was grateful to Ginny for restoring his natural personality. The Healing had made an amazing difference. She really *was* amazing.

Harry reached again for the letter in his pocket, both sick and excited at the idea of telling her so. More sick than excited. He knew he couldn't. Yet.

But he suddenly had the energy for another Patronus, and so he picked up his Omniculars and scanned the prison shore, unsettled by what he saw. Dozens more Dementors had come to at the doors and windows of the prison, all of them facing the guard station. Harry wondered if they were up to something—if they were planning some kind of massive escape, or if they even knew enough to plan a thing like that. He took note of two guards already on shore; they stood together on an outcropping of rocks.

It was quiet and calm at the moment, but that meant nothing. Trusting his instincts, Harry urged Norbert to go lower, and he tapped his wand to his throat. "Keep an eye out," he called to the guards, whose heads snapped up. At the sight of him, they both looked awed, and Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat. They'd worked here for a week. He wished they'd stop looking at him like that.

"No problem, Mr. Potter," one of them called back, but the sound was nearly carried away in the wind. He turned red and tapped his own throat with his wand. "NO PROBLEM, MR. POTTER," he repeated hastily.

Harry shrugged and nodded, not sure how to respond. He turned his attention back to the Dementors and narrowed his eyes. More of them had already gathered, and they were pressing closer to the guard station. Something was happening. He only hoped that he would be able to sort it out before it went out of control. "Mick," he said, after he activated the Communication Charm. "Joe. Come here for a minute, there's something wrong."

* * * * *

It was dim in the guard station; the only light filtered in through the window, and lit the room in a dusty shaft. It was almost like sunset, although it was only three o'clock. Sirius backed against the

wall and pulled his wand, squinting into the dark corners of the room until he saw them. His heart began to race.

"I sense them." Sirius had marshaled every scrap of his self-control. If it was going to happen now—if the Dark army had finally chosen their moment—then there was no room for weakness. They could not succumb—he could not succumb. Not now that they had all come this far.

"Is that... Weasley?" Snape sounded honestly bewildered. It was a tone Sirius had never heard from Snape; he had followed Snape's gaze down towards the gates and tensed with apprehension.

Even from that far away, the Weasley hair had been hard to miss. It had been too short to be Ginny's hair and the person had been taller than Ginny—it had to be Ron. But why had he strayed so far from the castle? What had brought him to the gates?

"He was told to stay with Potter." Snape had glanced up at the windows of the Great Hall, and real anxiety had creased his face. *"Foolish. Always foolish..."* He had begun to stride away from the castle's perimeter and towards the gates, a look of determination on his face. *"Alert the Order. Now."*

Sirius hadn't needed the direction; he had already been muttering the spell that would bring the Order to Hogwarts, and he strode with Snape towards the bottom of the lawns, preparing himself for whatever was coming. The closer they had come to the gates, the more acutely aware Sirius became of the Dementors—there must have been an army of them—though it had been June, the air had been damp and chilled, and he had felt disturbingly at home in it. Azkaban.

Azkaban was in the *present*—he was *here*. He had to concentrate. There was no time for the shadows of the past, but they had suddenly gained abnormal strength and power, as horror always did when Dementors were near. Sirius panted and worked to clear his mind. He pressed his back to the wall and fought down the bile that threatened to rise.

Three Dementors. In front of him. Sirius's vision began to blur—he thought he had prepared, but the closeness of the creatures was more than he could bear. He wiped his forehead—his sweat was cold—and an old, inescapable anguish washed over him. He knew that he only had seconds to work.

The Dementors stayed in their corner, the dark sockets of their hoods turned towards Sirius as if they were studying him. Perhaps they were so ill that they had truly confused him for another Dementor.

Taking advantage of the pause, Sirius raised his wand. The Dementors turned their enormous cloaked heads towards one another in silent communication.

"Do I know you?" Sirius taunted, his voice very low. *"Were either of you good enough to be guards in my section? I was a high security prisoner."*

The Dementors remained still. And then, slowly, very slowly, one of them began to lift his arm. A bony, gray, slimy hand protruded from the sleeve of the decaying robes and pointed straight at Sirius.

The floor seemed to disappear from under him and he could feel tears falling from his eyes.

A cacophony of voices from very far away spiraled closer and closer to Sirius. It came from inside his head and from the main gates of Hogwarts. He had transformed and bounded closer to the gates, just in time to see them fly open in an explosion of horrible green light. The Dark army had broken through.

"NO!" Sirius shouted. He steadied his wand. *"Expulso Animus!"* The guardhouse filled with a bright, bright light.

The lights were coming from the Dementors. Spots appeared on their robes as bright pinpricks of light emanated from them and shot towards the ceiling. The dots grew less distinct as everything began to blur together and concentrate around the Dementors, and a rush of unnatural warmth filled the room. For a moment, Sirius was exhilarated. The spell must be working. The souls they had swallowed were bursting free, and the Dementors would be left without life. And if it worked on these Dementors then it would work on the rest of them—maniacal laughter erupted from Sirius's throat and he watched in furious satisfaction as the lights began to die. As the *Dementors* died. And *he* had killed them, he had *destroyed* them. He, who had more right than anyone to make them suffer.

For one last moment, the light was so bright that the Dementors looked almost like statues, and then the light exploded towards the walls and ceiling, clearing a dark space around the three hooded figures that still stood, their hoods focused on Sirius.

Sirius held his breath and waited, not sure what he was waiting for. Would they collapse, would they vanish, would their robes crumble into dust?

But none of those things happened; in fact, nothing happened at all. Sirius wondered if the Dementors were frozen, or petrified—perhaps he had merely paralyzed them. That would be a beginning.

And then, from the darkness within the nimbus of light, there was a low, rattling moan. The Dementors tilted up their faceless hoods and, to Sirius's horror, the life force he had expelled from them began to rush back into their rotting mouths, draining the room of all light, filling them again with what they needed to survive.

It hadn't worked. The spell was not strong enough. Sirius began to shake—they had survived and he was trapped here with them. He had to Disapparate—but no, of course. He couldn't Disapparate from here. He gave a breathless, terrified laugh, and quickly launched himself towards the window, but gave a cry of terror and backed away from it at once. Through it, he could see a crowd of hooded creatures, waiting for him—starving for him—sucking the remaining light from the room and stealing it from their fellows.

They'd Kiss him next.

Sirius turned back on the three Dementors, trembling from head to foot, and could not stop the moan that broke from him. "No..." he whimpered, and his wand hand faltered and dropped to his side. He had been such a fool. "Nooooo..." He had to defend himself—had to try a Patronus at least—but he could not piece together a single thought. He could do nothing but watch in panic and abhorrence as the Dementors began to glide towards him, reaching up their bony hands to push back their hoods.

* * * * *

Harry hovered above the shoreline, craning to see over Norbert's enormous back so that he could watch the Dementors. Their strange behavior chilled him; they were crowded around the hut, and Harry could have *sworn* that he had just seen a light pour through the window to which their hoods were pressed.

"What's happening, Potter?" Mick shouted. He and Joe had steered around to this side of the island, leaving their sections to the guards.

"I don't know..."

Harry's voice trailed off. From below, he heard a sickening sort of wail. He had never heard a Dementor make a noise like that, and a cold stab in his gut told him that it wasn't a Dementor at all. It was... it *had* to be a human. One of the guards, perhaps—had the Dementors dragged one of them into the prison, in order to feed on him? The thought made Harry ill. He watched as the two guards on the rocky outcropping turned and ran towards the guard station—apparently they had heard the noise—but they stopped dead when they saw how many Dementors they were up against.

"*Effractum Domus!*" It was a man's voice, hoarse and panicked, coming from within the guard station. "*Corruo Moenia! Corruo Domus!*"

"EMERGENCY," Harry shouted, activating the Communication Charm so that everyone at the dragon camp would hear him. "EVERYONE OUT HERE NOW!"

"What's happening, Harry?" Charlie's voice was immediately in his ear, but Harry couldn't answer—he had to concentrate.

There was a terrible noise, and the roof came flying off of the guard station. It shot into the air and over Harry's head, landing in the choppy waters behind him. Weak beams of light trailed out of the hut as its four walls collapsed. It only took a moment for the dust to settle. The floor to the guard station was all that remained, and it was bathed in a sickly green light. The guards on the ground inched closer to it, and Harry pulled on his Omnioculars again.

There were four Dementors in the guard station. One of them crouched low to the ground, covering its head with its sleeves while the other three made a circle around it. Dozens of others began to glide over the ruins of the shattered station walls, closer to the surrounded Dementor. From a healthy distance, the two guards began to shoot Patronuses at the Dementors, but they seemed to have little effect.

Harry couldn't understand it. There was no man after all—were the Dementors trying to Kiss one of their own? Were they capable of spells—of *speech*, when threatened? Was the rumor that they'd start eating each other going to come true? Harry felt a glimmer of hope at the thought that the Dementors might actually be on the way to destroying themselves—and then the crouching Dementor fell backwards.

It wasn't a Dementor at all. It *was* a man. A man with dark hair and pale skin, whom Harry had seen like this before. Just like this. His face was slack. He was unconscious. And they were all

around him.

Harry thought he was going to be sick.

Without a second thought, he unfastened his harness, grabbed his Firebolt, and sped towards his godfather.

* * * * *

Sirius could not fight. He lay motionless, watching the worst moments of his life flash like a Kinolia, making pictures against his closed eyelids. Remus, staring at him in unconcealed disgust when he discovered who had let Snape into the Whomping Willow. James's face, pale and wide-eyed, lying amongst the ruins of his house. Lily, collapsed on the floor of the nursery. Peter's empty-eyed leer in the middle of the Muggle street where Sirius had given away his freedom. The gates of Hogwarts bursting open to admit a host of evil-Ron Weasley's obvious hair disappearing into the onrush of Death Eaters, giants, Dementors...

"Ron!" Sirius had shouted, but the noise was too great and the army too dense. Knowing that he had little time—if any—to get to Ron, Sirius had transformed, ready to bound in among the Dark wizards.

It had been too late. His way through had been blocked, and members of the Order had already advanced from the Forbidden Forest and begun to fight, making it impossible for Padfoot to see what was happening beyond them. He could tell that many of the Order were having problems with the fact that so many of the enemy appeared to be students—but the students were vicious... and where had they all come from so quickly? Still panicked for Ron's sake, Padfoot had turned and bounded up the lawns between them, amazed at how many seemed to have turned on their fellows. Students had been leading students, who had appeared paralyzed, out of Hogwarts in long lines. The frozen students' eyes were wide and some of the younger ones were sobbing silently—Padfoot had searched among them for Harry, and seen him nowhere.

As he had continued to run towards the castle's entrance, Death Eaters had swarmed around the perimeter of the castle and raised their wands. As Padfoot had looked on, unable to prevent it, the ceiling of the Great Hall had started to collapse. The ground beneath his paws had begun to shake.

And then there had been a terrible crashing noise, followed by a high-pitched scream of suffering.

Don't let it be Harry...

But it couldn't have been Harry, for moments later, Harry had appeared in the entrance doors, along with Hermione and Ron—

Ron. Ron had flung the doors open. Padfoot had stared for a moment at the shock of red hair, unable to comprehend it, and then, knowing that he needed all his faculties, he had transformed again into Sirius and pulled his wand. If Ron was with Harry, then who had the Dark Army absorbed, down at the gates?

It hadn't mattered. The war—possibly the end of the war—had begun around him, and everywhere his help was needed; Sirius turned to free the first frozen student he saw, but before he could take a step his legs locked and he toppled forward.

"Haven't seen you since Azkaban, Black." Lestrangle had stood over him, laughing.

Azkaban. That's where I am now. Sirius tried to force himself to open his eyes, but he couldn't. Something clammy and revolting brushed his cheek. It was over. His soul belonged to them.

"And I haven't seen you since Percy Weasley's murder, Lestrangle." Snape had appeared behind him, and Sirius had never been so glad to see his sallow face. He held the tip of his wand to Lestrangle's throat, and if Sirius hadn't known better, he would have thought that Snape was smiling.

"A pity we won't be spending more time together in the future, Severus." Lestrangle seemed to have forgotten about Sirius for the moment. Sirius had struggled to sit up on the lawn, but a hex kept him still, and Snape must have seen it.

In a flash, Snape had taken his wand from Lestrangle's neck and muttered a counter-curse, but before he could regain his advantage, Lestrangle whirled on him, wand out, and threw a curse so violent that Sirius feared for Snape's life.

"Lacero!"

Snape had deflected it and stepped aside, his breath coming quickly, his black eyes alight. *"A valiant effort,"* he had hissed, and beckoned for Lestrangle to try again. *"What else?"*

Sirius had staggered to his feet and pulled his wand, but it was too late. Lestranger's mouth had already been open in a curse.

"Minuo!"

Snape had already been laughing as the curse had flown back on Lestranger, who had begun to bleed from the nose and ears. *"Have we had this duel? I seem to remember... ah yes. The day we were Marked."* Snape had leered. *"But you must have learned something since then. Or didn't they teach you new tricks in Azkaban?"*

Lestranger had made a noise of animal fury, his dank hair swinging across his forehead, blood running in rivulets past his mouth and dripping onto his robes. *"Excorio!"* he had howled.

Snape had sent up a shield with such efficiency that Sirius had been grudgingly impressed, and again the curse had deflected on Lestranger, whose skin had begun to peel at his hairline, exposing the red flesh beneath, as if his whole face was a mask about to be removed. But he had raised his wand again, his eyes burning.

Sirius had held up his wand to help Snape block whatever else was coming, but Snape had only shaken his head.

"Go, Black. I have things to discuss with my old friend."

And, as the battle had raged around them, Snape and Lestranger had continued to duel, backing each other down the lawns and back towards the gates, locked in combat. Sirius had known that he had to move—to help the others—to join the fight—but he had watched Snape go until he could not see him. Until the chalk-white, insufferably arrogant face had disappeared into the raging ring of Dark wizards at the Hogwarts gates.

Until he had heard Harry calling for him... calling his name...

* * * * *

"Sirius! SIRIUS!" Harry shouted from his broomstick, but Sirius did not stir. *"Expecto Patronum! Expecto Patronum! EXPECTO PATRONUM!"* He soared down behind the Dementors. Ignoring the danger, he plunged in between them, but they seemed impervious to his spells; Harry had never seen the Dementors so resistant—they must have been so starved for human emotion that they were refusing to disperse.

"Come on, Dad, help him," he muttered to himself. "Come on, Prongs—*Expecto PATRONUM!*" That one seemed to have more of an effect; the silver stag charged towards the Dementors, and they made a collective move backwards, but made no effort to flee.

Harry landed on a pile of splintered wood beside Sirius, and turned towards the Dementor closest to his godfather. A familiar, horrible feeling gnawed at his stomach and his head throbbed. He was cold and ill. He was going to faint; there were too many of them. Deep in his head, his mother began to scream, and there was nothing he could do to banish her voice. The Dementors hadn't affected him this badly in a long time, but then, he hadn't faced them without Norbert. The auras of the dragons must have been incredible, to keep this much of the terror at bay.

Happy thought. He had to find one. Something joyful—anything—Harry searched himself in a panic, desperate to save Sirius. In his mind he saw his godfather, his head thrown back in the car park of the cinema, laughing fit to burst. Harry clung to the image; Sirius *would* live through this. Sirius would come out of this, and they would go together on another Black and Potter prank—yes—Harry's nausea lifted; the necessary space cleared in his mind—

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" he cried, and the Dementors in front of him were blasted away by the force of the Patronus he produced.

Harry whirled, putting himself between his godfather and the rest of the Dementors. But he didn't know how much more he would be able to help. He had very little energy left. He began to sway, and he fought to keep his footing, but the world was becoming a blur. Between the Dementors' gathered, hulking robes, Harry saw the choppy water crashing against the rocks... saw the guards doing their best to drive off the outer ring of Dementors and work their way to the center... saw what looked like an army of wizards and witches on broomsticks rocketing towards the prison, Charlie at their head.

"Expecto... Patronum..." Harry managed, as the Dementors crushed towards him, knocking him back. He stumbled and fell, landing just in front of where Sirius had collapsed, and he crawled backwards, trying to hold out his wand as he protected his godfather with his body. *"Expecto Patronum..."*

But Prongs had deserted him. Harry tried to concentrate, but could not. Far away, he heard the shouts of Charlie and the other dragon keepers. They sounded terrified. But Harry wasn't terrified at all... he was resigned. The fog in his head was growing thicker... the voices of his friends were

growing dimmer... daylight was spiraling away.... was it his mind losing consciousness? Harry only knew that it was suddenly very dark, and that it smelled like rancid meat, and that his wrist had been clasped by something bony and frozen, and that what felt like a skinless finger was lifting his chin...

"Not Harry... please not Harry..."

"HARRY!"

Harry couldn't answer Charlie now. The stench of decay filled his nostrils and something cold and damp touched his mouth.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

Harry gasped and stumbled. A dragon, wide and warm and silver, blasted its way between his body and the Dementor that had been about to Kiss him. It forced the Dementor several yards back, allowing Harry time to recover his wits and roll onto his hands and knees, and then it swooped upwards and vanished into thin air.

Harry gripped his wand and pushed himself to his feet, squinting after the dragon and wondering how it had disappeared so quickly. It took him a moment to realize that it was not a dragon at all—it was Charlie's Patronus—before it swooped to shore again and pushed the Dementors further away.

And it was not the only one. Harry heard Cho's voice, and Viktor's, and Mick's, mingling with dozens of others. And all around him he saw explosions of silver light—another dragon, a giant eagle, a Manticore—

The Dementors were scattering. The circle around Harry and Sirius was growing wider, and Harry was grabbed beneath the arms and hauled onto a stretcher. He was strapped onto the back of a mediwizard's broom before he knew what had happened.

"Who is that?" someone demanded.

"Sirius Black." Charlie sounded baffled.

"Is he alive?" Cho asked anxiously, and Harry craned his head to watch as Sirius was hauled onto another mediwizarding broom and buckled flat to a stretcher.

"What was he thinking?" Mick asked.

"He really is mad, isn't he?" said someone else.

"Guess there's some truth to those stories..."

The voices died out as the mediwizard's broom lifted into the air, and all Harry could hear for the next several minutes was the wind that blew across him. When they landed, they floated him into the medical tent and lifted from the stretcher to a bed. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that the same thing was being done to Sirius.

Harry sat up and swung his legs out of bed.

"Mr. Potter, please—" the mediwizard began, but Harry got to his feet and crossed to the bed where Sirius was lying, still unconscious.

"Sirius?" he said, reaching out to feel Sirius's forehead. It was almost as gray as his robes and was icy-cold to the touch. "Sirius? Wake up."

Several dragon keepers were standing around, discussing what to do next, but Harry blocked out their voices and concentrated on trying to wake Sirius.

"Here! Take this." Cho stood behind Harry—he didn't know how long she'd been there. She held out a large bar of chocolate.

"Thanks," Harry said, taking the bar from her and unwrapping it. His hands were shaking, and he was surprised to realize that he was angry. Relief was not his uppermost emotion. He didn't need to ask what had happened—he knew that Sirius was insane enough to try that spell of Hermione's without telling anyone, and there was no other explanation for Sirius's sudden appearance in the guard station. He hadn't arrived at Azkaban by accident. Not this time.

"You need to eat this," Harry said, shaking Sirius's shoulder. "You need to wake up and eat this now."

Sirius groaned, but his eyes did not open. "Harry?" he mumbled.

"Eat this," Harry repeated. "Don't talk." He broke off a piece of chocolate and stuffed it into Sirius's mouth.

Sirius swallowed, and his eyes flickered open. "It didn't work, did it?" he asked weakly. "They're... still alive."

"Yes, they're bloody still alive, Sirius!" Harry glared down at the lunatic on the bed. He heard people whispering behind him, and he turned. "He's all right! Just leave me with him."

For a minute, everyone stared at him without moving, and then—"Come on," Cho said, herding the other wizards away from Harry and Sirius. "They're okay, let's leave them for a bit."

Harry shot her a grateful look. When everyone was out of earshot, he turned and broke off

another piece of the chocolate bar. Sirius, who was now propped up on his elbows, and still rather gray, looked sick at the sight of more chocolate, but he ate it without protest and immediately looked much better. He sat up.

"I thought they were going to kill you," Harry said. His fingers were shaking. He half-flung the rest of the chocolate at Sirius, pulled his wand and Summoned a chair from across the tent. It flew over with twice the necessary force and clattered to the floor. Harry sank into it. "Are you going to tell me what you were doing?"

"I thought I'd—" Sirius choked in mid-swallow and cleared his throat. "I thought I'd worked out a way to destroy them."

"And you just thought you'd come and try it now, for fun? Without telling anyone? Just swim out to Azkaban and have a go at the Dementors because you thought you'd worked it out?" Harry knew he sounded unhinged, but there was no other way to be. "Are you *stupid*? Are you *mad*?"

Sirius winced and touched his temples. "Yes," he muttered.

"Yes," Harry agreed vehemently. "You are. We fought a *war*—you're the one who told me *never* to go in alone, you *never* go in alone, did you *forget* that? Didn't you just give Ginny a lecture on that?"

Sirius sat there, his shoulders bent, rubbing his head. He didn't answer.

"What's the *matter* with everyone lately?" Harry gave a hysterical laugh. "I can't—you can't *die*, do you understand that? *You can't die.*"

Sirius moved a hand over his face and pressed his thumb and fingers to his closed eyelids.

"My dad left me to *you*. Can you *hear me*?"

"Yes," Sirius barely whispered.

But Harry wasn't finished. The dark thing that had begun to unravel in his heart in front of Ginny, weeks ago, was thrashing again. Begging to be seen and heard. "Both of you," he spat. "Idiots. Her going to Malfoy's, you going into Azkaban—what's next? Hermione jumps off a building and Ron drowns himself?"

"Harry..."

"Just shut up." He was furious. "What the hell is wrong with you? Do you *want* to die?"

Sirius turned and looked at him. "Of course not," he said faintly.

"Well too bad, you'll be dead soon," Harry shot. "Remus is going to kill you."

Some of Sirius's color came back and he gave a choked sort of laugh.

Harry swung out blindly and hit Sirius hard in the shoulder before he'd thought about it. "You think this is *funny*?" he shouted. "Yeah?"

"Harry—" Sirius said, swiping Harry's hand away and grabbing his shoulder. "Listen to me, I'm being serious. I know it was stupid, but this was for *you*. Have you looked at yourself in the mirror lately?"

Harry shook Sirius off and sat back. He ran a hand through his hair. "What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

"It means you look old," Sirius turned to sit on the edge of the bed and setting his feet on the floor. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. "You look older than your father ever looked, and you're younger than he was when he died. You look like hell. You *act* like hell. The Dementors are affecting you—"

Harry gave another mad laugh. "*Affecting* me? Yeah, well that's probably because they nearly Kissed me just now."

Sirius went gray again. "Nearly Kissed..."

"That's right. What did you *think* was going to happen if you tried a stunt like this on my shift? I went down there to get you, and one of them grabbed me by the face and you're right. It had an *effect*."

For a moment, it seemed that Sirius was going to be sick.

"Look, just forget it." Harry snorted. "There's no point getting upset now. We're both alive. Thank Charlie Weasley for that."

Sirius shut his eyes for a moment and put his hand over them again. "I will," he said huskily, after a moment. "I'm...I suppose there's no point in telling you that I am sorry."

"Not really," Harry said mercilessly. "You might tell the others, though. It took about twenty people to drive back the Dementors after what you did, and they all risked themselves."

Sirius looked paler with every word, but Harry didn't care. He was going to get this *out*.

"You know, I might look like hell, but at least I'm not a suicidal maniac."

"I'm not—" Sirius began, sitting up straight.

"You are. You're insane. Going down there by yourself with an untested spell—"

Sirius looked desperate. "It was *time*. The Dementors have to be—"

"Sirius, no one *disagrees* that the Dementors are a problem. Everyone would like to see them destroyed. But Mr. Weasley *told* you that other things had to be dealt with first—"

Sirius made a derisive noise. "Other things," he said mockingly, and Harry wanted to hit him again.

"Don't talk about Arthur Weasley in front of me," he said coldly. "Not one word. Be as stupid as you like, but don't try blaming him for it. He's brilliant. He's been more of a father to me than anyone else ever has and I won't let *anyone*—" Harry felt his throat closing.

Sirius looked struck to the heart.

"Sirius. Harry. Good afternoon, both of you."

Harry turned in his chair so fast that he almost knocked himself over. Mr. Weasley stood between the open flaps of the tent, his fingertips steepled in front of his mouth. He wore long, dark blue robes, a crooked, formal hat, and a grave expression. He gave Harry a quiet nod, then fixed his eyes on Sirius and studied him from across the room, looking more truly like the Minister of Magic than Harry had ever seen him.

He wondered how much Mr. Weasley had heard.

Sirius seemed to be wondering the same thing; Harry turned back to look at his godfather and was startled by the expression on his face. Sirius looked apprehensive, afraid of punishment, and very, very young. Harry had the distinct feeling that he was looking not at a man, but at a boy from Hogwarts.

"A-Arthur—" Sirius tried to stand.

"You had better sit." Mr. Weasley dropped his hands to his sides and turned his gaze back to Harry. "All right, Harry?" he asked quietly.

Harry nodded.

"That was a very brave thing you did," he said, and lay a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Thank you."

Harry's shoulders relaxed under the comforting pressure. "All right."

"Arthur, I'm sorry—" Sirius burst out. "I didn't think."

Mr. Weasley looked at Sirius. "I hope not," he said, still quietly. "I would hate to believe that you considered the situation for even one minute before risking as many lives as you did. I would prefer to believe that you temporarily lost your mind."

"He did," Harry muttered.

"Harry." Mr. Weasley held up a hand to silence him. "Let Sirius explain himself to me."

Sirius opened his mouth, and his expression was a familiar mix of defensiveness, self-righteousness and scorn. But to Harry's surprise, before Sirius could get a word out, his eyes dimmed, his mouth closed, and he shook his head miserably. "There's no explanation," he managed. "I don't know what I... I thought I could...destroy them."

Mr. Weasley was silent for a moment. "This is difficult," he said. "I can't deny that I have a very personal reaction... for Charlie's sake, and Harry's. And yours. Not to mention the fact that I have trusted you to look after my son and daughter."

Harry glanced at Sirius and saw that he looked sicker than ever.

"But my reasons for suspending you from the Ministry are entirely professional," Mr. Weasley continued. "Make no mistake about that."

Sirius's mouth fell open. "Suspending me?" he repeated. "Arthur, please, you can't—there's so much I need to—"

"I have to." Mr. Weasley looked grimly at him. "Do you think I want to? Do you think that it will make things simpler for me to organize and control? I *need* you there, Sirius. But you have trespassed on high-security grounds, you have impersonated a Dark creature, you flouted the mandate of the Privy Council—not to mention the Minister—that no action is to be taken against the Dementors without their full approval."

Harry's head spun as Mr. Weasley continued to list infractions.

"You have recklessly endangered employees of the Ministry. You have endangered yourself. And you are in direct violation of Misuse of Magic Code 50, Article 13—no wizard shall publicly practice undeveloped and unsanctioned magic. You have shown poor judgment all around. How can I allow you to continue the trials of Death Eaters without first serving any punishment?"

"Punishment?" Harry asked at once, his stomach cold. "What do you—you don't mean he has to go to—"

"These are not crimes worthy of Culparrat," Mr. Weasley assured him. "But... they are crimes. You are suspended, Sirius."

"For how long?" Sirius demanded.

"Until further notice." Mr. Weasley's disappointment was evident in his eyes. "I will discuss it with several people and determine what is just. Until then...I suggest you consider your actions and make amends to those you could easily have hurt." He sighed, and his eyes grew gentler. "You have every right to hate them, Sirius. I don't pretend to understand what you suffered at their hands. And I am sorry that they are still alive, for your sake."

Sirius looked away. He gave a very faint nod.

"I will inform you when a decision has been reached." Mr. Weasley went towards the tent flaps. "Get some rest, both of you." He left them alone.

The tent was silent for several minutes, and then Sirius got to his feet. "I'm going home," he said. Harry could barely hear him. "I'm so sorry, Harry, I'm so..." Sirius looked helplessly at him. "I know it doesn't make a difference," he muttered, and pulled his wand to Disapparate.

"Wait," Harry said quickly.

Sirius lowered his wand and went still.

Harry stood and faced his godfather. Sirius was taller, and technically he was older—the lines on his face were testament to that. But he still looked strangely young, and Harry thought how truly young he was. Or immature, at least. Sirius had never had an opportunity to grow up. He had been in school during a war too. And before it had ended, before he had ever had an opportunity to think of anything else, he had been thrown in Azkaban, where he had learned nothing but fear and horror and revenge. He had escaped—but only in time to fight another war—and now...

Now they were on equal footing. Neither of them had had much time to get used to the real world, and both of them had done some stupid things. And, Harry realized, he was no longer angry with Sirius. Not really. There was no point, now that Mr. Weasley had punished him.

"It's all right," Harry said, into the silence. "You don't have to apologize. I'm... just glad you're all right."

Sirius bowed his head.

"I'm sorry you're suspended."

"I deserve it," Sirius said harshly, not looking up. "But the rest of the Ministry doesn't. Ron doesn't—he's going to have twice the work. I didn't *think*. I didn't think."

"Yeah, well. It... happens." Harry thought back on the times when he had done thoughtless, reckless things. "But don't worry about me, all right? We're..." He wasn't quite sure how to put it. "We're all right, Sirius."

Sirius looked up at him. "Yeah?" he asked, sounding no older than Harry was.

"Yeah."

A smile flickered across Sirius's face and then he was grim again. "Thank you for what you did," he said. "For... saving my life." He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Harry, I don't know what I—"

"Stop," Harry said. "Forget it. We're fine, all right? I never thanked you for Expecto Sacrificum, so... we're even."

Sirius glanced at him and looked oddly hesitant. "Does it... bother you, when I tell you how much you're like your dad?" he asked.

Harry's heart swelled, as it always did when the comparison was made. "It's the best thing you can tell me."

Sirius nodded, and then he narrowed his eyes and gave Harry a very funny look. "I just had a thought," he said. "I... don't know if you'll go for it."

Harry waited.

"Instead of a prank... next time we do a Black and Potter..." Sirius looked as if he didn't quite know how to say it. "Have you ever been to Godric's Hollow? I mean—since you left it?"

Harry's heart began to beat fast and hard. "No," he whispered.

"Would you... want to..."

"Yes," Harry said quickly. "Yes, I want to."

Sirius nodded. "All right," he said, and though his voice was dry, his eyes were rather wet. "We'll do that. I'd... better go and... talk to Remus."

Harry's chest was tight. "Good luck," he managed.

Sirius gave him a fleeting smile, and raised his wand. "See you later, Harry," he said, and Disapparated.

A/N: Thanks to B Bennett, who listens to many things that are read out loud to her. She claims that this is voluntary, but in reality she has no choice. Thanks to JEC for the legal advice. Thanks to Firelocks, for never getting bored of hashing through ideas.

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nit picks make us bang our heads on walls. Other times, their nit picks make us bang our heads on walls and then drink a beer.

— CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE —

Ella

“Okay,” said Ginny, and she tucked the blankets back around Mr. Granger’s chest. She liked Saturdays; Remus let her work for two hours on weekend mornings, and it made her feel more useful—though it still didn’t seem like enough. “I’m sorry I can’t do more today. I’ll be back tomorrow, all right?”

She passed a hand over his face and was sickened again by the twisted minefield of angry knots and ruined tissue that surrounded his brain. She couldn’t even feel the brain itself, and had no idea what condition it was in. Their bones had absorbed much of the damage from the Cruciatus Curse; Ginny had made that determination when she had worked on their legs and found that it was worst in the centers, where the bones were. In a way, that was good. It meant that the bones had absorbed the bulk of the impact, keeping damage away from the more fragile tissue. But it made the tissue inside his skull much harder to read. Ginny had turned the Grangers over and felt their heads from behind, thinking that it might have been easier to approach that way. But their spinal cords were full of knots, too, and there were things in the front that required more immediate attention.

Like their eyes. Ginny passed her fingers through the air just over Mr. Granger’s eyes. It was difficult. The energy was both sharp and deadened, like running her thumb across a hundred dull razorblade edges. There was no life in the aura here. Nothing to work with. Her fingers, now acutely sensitive, could not find a single knot of useful energy, and Ginny knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Hermione’s father would never see again. She only hoped that the curse had not passed behind his eyes and done equal damage to his brain. She patted his shoulder and turned to give Mrs. Granger her half of the Healing session that Ginny had scheduled for this Saturday morning.

Since the ruined Wolfsbane Potion, there had been no more spur-of-the-moment Healing sessions. There had been no more running off without permission, and there had been no dragons. There had been, instead, a detailed schedule, a renewed appreciation for Remus, and a shocking improvement in her Potions and Arithmancy marks. There had also been a sense of peace and rest. She was no longer exhausted all the time, and she had felt no need to snap at anyone. Almost everything had set itself to rights.

Almost.

She’d ruined it with Harry. She should have told him that she knew how she felt about him, and she should have told him *how* she knew it—she should have explained. She should have been more understanding about his feelings towards Malfoy. In the past few weeks, Ginny had tried to reverse their situations in her head; she’d imagined that Harry was on a broom behind Pansy Parkinson every day, meeting her after hours without explaining himself. Ginny could hardly bear the vision. She’d treated him unfairly, and sometimes she missed him so much that she nearly sprinted down to the Notch in the middle of study sessions to ask him to forgive her. But if he hadn’t said anything to her by now, then he probably didn’t feel the way she’d hoped he would—she tried not to realize it because it hurt so much to let him go... but there it was.

She pulled the covers away from Mrs. Granger’s chest and concentrated. Harry had no place here. There was no schoolwork; there were no N.E.W.T.s. There was this hour, and these little knots of fire that consumed the upper section of Mrs. Granger’s throat. Ginny had worked patiently, a few inches at a time, and after today she would begin to work on their cranial organs and their minds. She shut her eyes and painstakingly untangled a strand of Mrs. Granger’s energy, as if it were a very fine chain that had got itself into knots in a jewelry box.

When the energy was clean, Ginny checked her watch. “That’s you taken care of,” she said to Mrs. Granger, and replaced her blankets. “It’s good to see you.” She smoothed Hermione’s mum’s hair away from her face and thought how strange it was that she had become so familiar with the

Grangers' sleeping expressions. They were silent friends. She felt she knew them intimately. But when they woke, they would hardly know her at all.

When they woke, Ginny would not allow herself to think "if" anymore. She would work until it happened. Her gifts were nothing to her if she couldn't use them for the sake of her family first—and Hermione *was* family. Hermione had buoyed her up for the last two months, and she had done amazing work for her dad at the Ministry. She had helped to end the war, she was in love with Ron, and she deserved her parents back.

"I have the loveliest sister, in your daughter," she said quietly to Mrs. Granger. "You'll be so amazed when you see how she's turned out."

Ginny left St. Mungo's on schedule. She Apparated into her bedroom at Lupin Lodge to put away her coat and badge, then threw on work robes and went downstairs to study.

When she ran into Harry at the bottom of the stairs, it was at once so natural and so unexpected that she gasped.

"H-Harry!" She hadn't seen him since the day after Remus's terrible transformation. She had watched him walk away and she had known, deep in her heart, that she could have gone after him. But she hadn't.

Harry took a step back, looking as if he would have liked to run. He swallowed—she could see his Adam's apple bob in his throat—and nodded as if to say that he was indeed Harry.

"What are you *doing* here?"

"I'm only here for a minute," he said quickly, glancing away. "I'm on my way out with Sirius."

Ginny wanted to ask where they were going, but they hadn't been familiar in so long that she simply couldn't bring herself to do it. She only nodded. "Okay..." she said, but still couldn't work out why he would have been heading up the stairs.

"I was just going to use the loo—" Harry managed, still not looking at her. "We were supposed to leave half an hour ago, and I didn't think—" He stopped, but Ginny knew what he was going to say. *I didn't think you'd be here. I didn't think I'd have to see you.* He radiated every kind of emotion. He felt... agitated and nervous. Excited. Shy. Reserved and unsure. Defensive and vulnerable. And underneath it were the currents of his past, his power, his pride and bravery and goodness. He felt like *Harry*, and Ginny had so missed his energy near her that she wanted to fall into it and shut her eyes and drown.

Instead, she blocked it. She didn't have any right to step into his feelings. They were private, and he probably didn't want her in them. "Don't... don't let me keep you," she finally said and hurried past him, out of the front room and into the study, where she shut the door and tried to breathe, her heart beating double. He was in the house. He was in the house.

Feeling very much eleven, Ginny went to the cauldron and worked on her Potions assignment to calm her mind. It was a two-day potion that had been bubbling since yesterday morning's lesson, and she was determined to get it right. She stirred with exact strokes until it looked just as it was described in her textbook, and then she put down the stirring rod and tapped her fingers on her thighs. Remus would need to come and see it, so that he could mark it.

"Remus?" She stuck her head out of the door, hoping that he would come to her. She didn't want to walk through the house; she didn't want to see Harry again.

Yes I do.

Ginny went toward the sound of voices in the kitchen. She could hear Sirius and Remus. She could not hear Harry. But she was unsurprised, when she pushed the door open, to see him standing against the worktop, participating silently in the conversation. He glanced at her, and she quickly flicked her eyes away to Remus as her face went hot.

"Do you have a minute to look in my cauldron?" she asked. "I'm finished."

Remus raised an eyebrow. "Excellent," he said, and turned to Sirius. "I'll be right back." He went past Ginny and towards the study. Ginny turned to follow him, but Sirius's voice stopped her.

"I don't think it's possible, Ron. And you shouldn't be talking about this."

Ginny stayed near the door and looked into the dining room, where Ron and Hermione sat at the table, eating crisps and looking through enormous books. Ron had been buried in work since Sirius's suspension; he was now entirely responsible for continuing work on Malfoy's case, but he didn't seem to mind.

"I'm not asking for specific advice on a case or anything," said Ron, flicking open another book. "Just making conversation. Say, hypothetically, that a prisoner with a bad attitude and a pasty face—"

"Ron," Sirius said warningly. But he looked amused.

"Say that this prisoner was trying to get off on a technicality, but that he *didn't* get off, and we

did try to convict him in a trial.”

Sirius nodded.

“And say that I needed to bring a witness to the stand...” Ron’s gaze settled on Ginny. “But that she was under contract not to speak about what she knew.”

Ginny gave him a dirty look.

“Hypothetically,” Ron reminded her, putting up his hands to show his innocence. “Did I say anything specific?”

“Subtle as a Bludger, aren’t you, Ron?” Remus asked, coming back into the kitchen and carrying a little vial of potion in his hand. He pointed to Sirius. “You’re going to taint this case, if you’re not careful.”

“He needs my help,” Sirius pleaded. “I’m allowed to help. I can’t just not do *anything* for six weeks.”

“You’re fortunate it wasn’t six months,” Remus said, shooting Sirius a narrow glare. He looked as though he would have liked to say more, but he shut his mouth in a line and breathed hard through his nose.

Ginny could feel the tension at work in the room; it raced around her like webs, tangling her up in its complexity. She knew—they all did—what Sirius had attempted at Azkaban, and she knew that it had nearly cost him his life. She couldn’t believe that he would do something so stupid—it would have destroyed Remus and Harry to lose him, not to mention being horrible for the rest of them, and it would have cut short his excellent influence in the Ministry and in the Order. He was no better than she was, and she dearly would have loved to point that out. But the lecture was not hers to give, and she knew he’d already been shouted at by the people who deserved most to shout. Not to mention that he had been officially censured—she knew it was killing him not to be able to work. But her father, Rose Brown, and Charlie and Mick had decided that six weeks was the shortest suspension they could possibly impose.

Sirius pushed his hair back and his eyes were a bit wild. “Don’t...” he began, and then shook his head and looked down. “All right.”

“I have a question,” Harry asked suddenly, and a lovely chill went across Ginny’s shoulders and down her spine. His voice was beautiful. She missed it.

“Well?” Sirius pressed, when Harry stayed quiet.

“It’s... Malfoy,” Harry said slowly. “I want to know what sort of power he had over the Dementors.”

Ginny’s lungs constricted. How did Harry *know*? Had she let something slip?

“They started to lose control when Malfoy left,” Harry continued, “and they got worse every day—they’ve hit a plateau now, but it’s still bad. They haven’t gone back to being calm, not even for a minute. There *has* to be a connection—I think Moody was on to something.”

Moody? Ginny looked at each of their faces and realized that, somehow, they all knew something that she did not. She had the nasty feeling that they were back in school and that she had been excluded from a very important secret.

“Yeah?” Ron got to his feet and came to stand in the kitchen door. “Is there any proof? Anything at all that you can think of?”

“Harry, you don’t honestly think it was Malfoy doing all that, do you?” Hermione asked, leaning back in her chair so that she could see past Ron. She sounded slightly worried. “I know the Dementors have gone wild, but it seems like a bit of a reach to blame it all on Malfoy, even if he *is*...”

“I know it doesn’t make sense,” Harry said.

“It makes sense,” Ron said vehemently. “It makes sense if Malfoy was doing what I said *all along*. He was doing something—I don’t know—he was doing *something*.”

“Like what?” Sirius leaned back against the worktop and gestured for Ron to take the floor. “You can’t just accuse him without—”

“Evidence, yes I know,” Ron narrowed his eyes. “I’ll work on it.”

“If Malfoy’s absence is what’s causing the problem,” Sirius went on, “it would mean that while he was up there he was—”

“Controlling the Dementors.”

Ginny clasped her hands behind her back and began to twist her fingers.

“And that’s impossible,” Sirius said. “No one’s ever been able to control Dementors when they didn’t want to be controlled, not even Dumbledore—”

“Except Voldemort.” Ron looked furious. “So Malfoy was probably using some evil Dark magic that none of us knows about because we’re all decent wizards—”

“Malfoy was eighteen and still in school when Voldemort was destroyed,” Sirius interrupted. “I

want to see him in prison, Ron, but we have yet to see evidence of any school-aged person having been given a Dark Mark and employed directly in Voldemort's service. It's highly unlikely that Malfoy had been taught any serious magic by Voldemort—"

"No, his *dad* taught him," Ron said heatedly. "It makes perfect sense. You know it does—he has to know things that his dad knew."

Or have things that belonged to his dad, thought Ginny, and she wished that she could say it. The conversation was excruciating. Still, she told herself, she didn't know exactly what the ring was capable of. She only knew it harbored something horrible.

Sirius opened his mouth, shut it again and nodded. "All right. It's a worthwhile theory."

Ron looked very smug.

"But where's your *proof*?"

Ron's smug look vanished. "I haven't got any," he muttered. "But that doesn't make me wrong, and I'm sure that if we just..." He trailed off. A light came into his eyes, and he fixed his gaze on Ginny, who drew warily back.

"What?" she asked.

"You know something," he said. "You *have* to know something."

"Ron..." Sirius sighed. "You can't."

"I can." He crossed his arms. "Ginny, you don't have to keep quiet. I've looked it up. Self-imposed oaths don't have any legal weight, you can talk whenever you like."

"This one isn't self imposed," Ginny said, trying hard to keep her temper. "I signed it before I went over there." It was not the first time Ron had pressed her for confidential information. And though she wanted nothing more than to be useful to her brothers and her father—and to Harry, who looked so tired and worn—there was nothing that any of them could say to make her go back on her signature. So she shook her head.

"No, you don't know anything?" Ron demanded. "Or no, you won't tell us?"

She didn't answer or move. Any reply would have given away more information than she was allowed. She could feel all their eyes on her, and she wondered what they thought of her for keeping her contract—she wondered if Harry thought she was still defending Malfoy. She wondered if he had honestly believed, even for one second, that she had shared anything more intimate than a Healing session with Malfoy. He probably did, and her silence would only drive that belief deeper.

But she didn't have a choice.

"Ginny," Ron said, and he sounded really angry, "are you really going to make me get official permission to drag this out of you? You can't keep a privileged silence, you're not a licensed mediwizard—"

"I work at St. Mungo's!" Ginny said hotly.

"So what? You work on your own, you're not part of any recognized body, Healers don't even have a legal category—"

"Maybe because there's just the *one* of us?" Ginny clenched her fists. "You're not going to convince me, Ron, I don't care if *you* won't recognize my oath. *I* do."

"Ginny, it's *Malfoy*!" Ron had gone a strangled shade of red. "You *can't* hide information that could potentially let him walk free to do more damage—"

"Leave her alone." Harry's voice was dead even, and Ron went silent at once. "She can't answer you, she signed a contract. It doesn't matter if it's Malfoy."

Ginny gazed at him, shocked.

So did everyone else, and the silence in the room was thick and strange. Ron looked like he would have liked to throw something. But Hermione caught Ginny's eye for just a moment, and then she looked back down at her books, smiling faintly.

"I... need a volunteer," Remus said, before the silence could stretch to the point of discomfort, and Ginny looked at him, a bit confused. What did a volunteer have to do with anything? "Not to change the subject," he went on, "but if there's anyone who has a cut or scrape, I'd like to test this potion." He held up the little vial of Ginny's homework. "I can't mark it until I know if it's effective. That is... *I could*. But this might be more interesting."

"What potion is it?" Hermione asked. "Skin Regrowth?"

"Ten points to Gryffindor." Remus smiled through the kitchen doorway at Hermione, who looked as if she had missed hearing the words. She beamed. "I'm in perfect condition, myself," Remus said, and grinned a little. "And I'm not really in the mood to give myself a paper cut, so if anyone has an injury I could—ah. Thank you, Harry."

Harry had rolled up his sleeve, pulled back a bandage he'd obviously applied himself, and offered the skin just above his wrist. It was marred by a red, wet-looking circle about the size of a Galleon.

Around the wound, the skin had gone slightly yellow and started to curl.

Ginny sucked in a breath at the sight of it. "How did you—"

"Got burnt," he said simply. "Didn't put my shield up fast enough."

"Did it occur to you to go to the mediwizarding tent?" Sirius grabbed Harry's hand and took a closer look.

"Yes, actually, it did." Harry shrugged. "But then I forgot. I just wanted to get home."

"Well." Remus cupped a hand under Harry's forearm and tilted the vial over the nasty-looking welt. "Let's hope Ginny was meticulous."

Harry gave Remus a quick, nervous look, and Ginny bit down on the inside of her lip. She held the flesh tightly in her teeth and watched the potion drip down onto Harry's burn, hoping that she had got it right. She felt very much as though she were back in Snape's classroom, where it had never been an empty threat that he would test any number of things on any of them, whether the potions were ruined or not. That had always been terrifying, and it was no different now—though at least Remus wouldn't leer with pleasure if the potion *did* burn Harry's arm off.

Harry hissed in pain and winced as the potion met the open wound and made a sizzling noise. "Feels about right," he muttered.

And then, to Ginny's great relief, the skin around the burn uncurled. It stretched from all sides towards the center, and the flesh met seamlessly over the wound. It settled, after a minute, and looked like regular skin. It was nearly the right color, if a bit shinier and pinker than the rest of his arm—but then, that was the way burns healed. Charlie had loads of those.

Harry prodded it with a finger, then nodded. "Nice one," he said. "She should get..." He pretended to consider. "At least seven out of ten."

"I should get ten," she protested, but she had to smile. He was joking with her, and she had been allowed to help him, at least a little bit. She had given him something. Harry traced his finger over the surface of the healed burn, and Ginny took an involuntary step towards him. "You're sure it doesn't hurt?"

"No." He glanced up at her. "Thanks for that. I..." But he stopped, took his finger from his burn, and dropped his hands to his sides. The room was very quiet and everyone was watching them, and Ginny knew that Harry felt as awkward about it as she did. Perhaps they were all glad to see that she and Harry were talking, but she wished they wouldn't stare. She wished they weren't *there*. For a moment she had felt alone with Harry, and it had seemed quite natural to share something with him. They had been headed towards... a conversation. They needed one, no matter the outcome—even if it was just to hear him say that he only wanted to be friends.

Ginny's stomach hurt at the thought.

"We're going to miss the film," Harry said suddenly, breaking the silence. He rolled down his sleeve and nodded at Sirius. "It starts in five minutes."

"Film?" Hermione pushed her chair back and came to stand beside Ron, looking intrigued. "Are you really going to the cinema?"

"Yes," Harry said. He pulled his wand. "Come if you want, but we have to leave now."

"What's the fillum?" Ron asked.

"*The Matrix*," said Sirius. "Looks like a good one—all action."

"And how would you know?" Remus asked suspiciously. "Since when do you keep up with Muggle films?"

"I saw the trailer for this one at—"

Harry elbowed him, and Sirius shut his mouth on a snicker.

"Sure, I'll go—let's all go!" Ron said, far too brightly for a person who had just been so angry. He pulled his wand. "Ginny, don't you think that'd be fun?"

Ginny shook her head, carefully not looking at Harry. Was Ron trying to set them up? "I've got school work."

"You can finish it tomorrow, it's the weekend—"

"No."

"Come on, it'll be great—"

"Don't, Ron," said Hermione, in a low voice. "That's enough."

Ron scowled. "All she ever says is no, lately. No to the cinema, no, she won't tell me what she knows about Malfoy—"

"She *signed* a contract," Harry said sharply.

The room lapsed back into waiting silence, and Ginny's pulse raced. It was intoxicating to hear him stand up for her.

"Thank you," she managed, her voice dry.

Harry's eyes flashed to her face, and he looked at her for a moment that felt unnaturally long, especially considering that everyone was still watching. When he finally shook himself and looked away, Ginny felt as if the floor had disappeared from under her. She needed him back.

Harry raised his wand. "Look, I don't want to miss it," he said to Sirius. "So I'm going."

"All right, all right." Sirius pulled his wand and Disapparated.

Harry flicked his wand, and a bit of parchment materialized in the air before him. He shot it across the room to Ron. "That's the address of the cinema—it faces south, make sure to Apparate behind the place so the Muggles don't see you."

"Right." Ron studied the paper for a moment, then tried to pass it to Hermione.

"No thanks," Hermione said. "I'll stay here."

Ron ruffled her hair and Disapparated.

Ginny wasn't certain if Harry's eyes really met hers or if she imagined it, and there was no time to comprehend the look on his face. An instant later, he had disappeared as well. She ached for him to come back—there was no point in being in the room without him. An hour ago, she had been almost reconciled to their falling out, but now the loss was deep and sharp again.

"Ginny?" Remus's voice was gentle.

She realized that she was staring at the spot where Harry had just been, and quickly moved her gaze to the first person she found. Hermione was watching her with sympathetic eyes, and Ginny gave her a meaningful look.

"I'm going to go and study," Ginny said, hoping that Hermione would follow her. "I'll be upstairs for a bit." She left the kitchen and was relieved when she heard a chair move, and footsteps follow behind her.

Hermione was in their room in a flash, shutting the door behind her. "Well?" she asked.

Ginny sat on the edge of her bed. "Well what?" She threw up her hands. "He left."

Hermione leaned against the door and crossed her arms. "At least you were talking."

"We weren't *really* talking," Ginny flopped onto her back. "We were just in the same room, that's all."

"You were talking. And he defended you."

Ginny was glad that there had been a witness. She wasn't imagining things. He *had* stood up for her.

"He misses you."

Ginny turned her head on her pillow and pinned Hermione with a look. "Did he tell you that?"

"I'm under a contract of complete confidentiality," Hermione said, smiling slightly. "Just trust me, all right? He's *like* this. He misses you. He doesn't know what to say. If you'd just say something to *him*, Ginny."

"Like what? What else should I say to him?" Ginny clenched her covers in her hands and shut her eyes. "I wish I'd never worked on Malfoy," she muttered. "Then we wouldn't have this problem." But she knew that she was wrong.

"Yes you would. It would've been over something else. Harry's..." Hermione paused. "Harry's hard to fight with. I had a horrible fight with him once. Ron did too. It always lasts for ages, and he never wants to apologize. He just wants it to be over."

"That doesn't seem fair."

"No, but..." Hermione's footsteps came closer. She sat on the edge of Ginny's bed and Ginny opened her eyes and looked up at her. "I'm not a Healer or anything, but I've been Harry's friend for a long time, and at the beginning I didn't understand why he was so terrible about holding grudges, but I think I understand it now. It's like... a test."

Ginny waited.

"He has to test. I don't know why. I imagine it's because he didn't have a regular childhood. I imagine he has a hard time believing people really love him, all the way through." Hermione shrugged. "He tested me. He stopped talking to me for a month—over a *broom*, can you believe him?" She snorted. "But he got over it, and we never really fought again. Not in a serious way. I passed that test—I still loved him, even though we'd had a fight. The fight went away, and I didn't. Does that make sense? Oh, it was much worse with Ron because Ron meant so much to him—you remember when Ron got in a huff about the Goblet of Fire? How jealous he was?"

Ginny nodded.

"Harry wouldn't speak to him for a month, but then the same thing happened—when that was over, Ron had passed. Harry knew they could fight, and Ron wouldn't leave. And they never had another fight like that, because there was no reason for it. Harry knows Ron loves him. Do you see

what I'm saying?"

Ginny thought she did. "He did it to Sirius, this year," she said slowly. "He was really hard on him. He didn't talk to him for a long time, and then... now it seems they're friends."

"Exactly. He does it to everyone he needs most. It's his way of... I don't know. Making sure he's loved unconditionally."

"I do love him unconditionally."

"I know."

"But then I... I gave him conditions because there are things I... and perhaps I shouldn't have been so... Hermione, it wasn't even a row, it was just that he said some things..." But Ginny couldn't explain. What Harry had shared was his business alone. "It was just me making demands and him not really answering."

Hermione looked at her with clear, comforting eyes. "I'm sure you're being too hard on yourself," she said gently. "I don't understand Harry a lot of the time—I think you *understand* him much better than I ever have—but I *know* him really, really well. I know how he operates. Better than you do, because I've had more time. And it's not my place to assume things like this, but I've always thought—well, since I came back, anyway—it's seemed clear to me that... well, he loves you, Ginny."

Ginny shut her eyes. Even to hear it from Hermione was a dizzying experience. "Do you mean that?" she whispered, when she found her voice. "No—don't say that."

"Why else would he have been so stupid? Why would he have got into such a rage about Malfoy? Let me tell you—" Hermione laughed. "Jealousy's the best indicator in the *world*." She sighed, and patted Ginny's hand. "I've so been wanting to talk to you about this. I'm glad you're feeling... well, *are* you feeling better?"

Ginny nodded. She didn't speak. She was worried her voice would break and she didn't want to get emotional. There was no point in that, yet. She needed to hear it from Harry.

"Can I ask you something, then?"

Ginny looked at her. "Mm-hmm."

Hermione kept hold of her hand. "How were my parents today?"

Ginny sat up and shook Harry as far out of her mind as she could get him. It wasn't far. "If I can restore their minds at all, then I really believe their bodies will work." She squeezed Hermione's hand. "And I'm going to start on their minds tomorrow. Their heads, anyway—I don't even know what's happening in their minds and I won't until I've cleared the damage out of their skull bones. There's a lot of work to be done. I can't predict how long it'll take."

"You're amazing."

"Don't say that yet."

Hermione sniffled. "No, even if they don't wake up, you're... amazing. Thank you so much, for doing this."

"Of course." Ginny gave Hermione a fierce hug. "Of course."

Hermione was still sniffing when she let go, and she immediately changed the subject. "The debates seem to be going well among the P.C.s don't they?"

The Privy Counselors had begun to debate just who ought to be appointed to the Magical Advisory, and who were the best candidates for Minister of Magic.

"Yes," said Ginny. "Dad's still a strong contender, which I think is great. And Rose Brown's name comes up a lot in the paper, have you noticed? Every Slytherin on that Privy Council is going to vote for her, and about half of them were in Slytherin House. She's got a very strong chance of being Minister."

Hermione nodded. "Well, she's clever and hard working, so it wouldn't be a tragedy, although I *do* hope it's your dad. The Secretary Privy's awfully young." Hermione stood and went to the door. "I don't know that I'd want all that responsibility in the hands of a twenty-eight year old."

"Seems old enough to me," Ginny said. "Imagine how much more we'll know in ten years." It seemed an age away. "I'll bet you could be the Minister of Magic in ten years," she said. "I need to talk to Harry," she added very abruptly, startling herself.

Hermione stopped in the door. "Then do it," she said, and left Ginny alone to sort out her thoughts.

* * * * *

The first of May was the warmest day of the year so far, and Molly fanned herself with the new *Charmed Life*, which was mercifully devoid of family photographs. Through the kitchen window, she could see the edge of the front garden, and in it she saw Matthew, struggling to unearth a gnome. He had the thing by its foot and was obviously not going to give up until he had flung it far

from the house.

Molly had given every boy a chore: Matthew, being strongest, had taken the gnomes; David, being the most fastidious, had happily helped her to sort and hang the laundry; Ralph, being the most energetic, had run down to the village to try a bit of shopping—it was the first time Molly had trusted him with money and she wanted to see how it went, and Adam had asked if he could gather herbs in the woods. He was always doing that, and it was somehow comforting to have an intellectual boy in the house again. Adam loved to study things in books and then try to duplicate them in the world. In the past two months, he'd taken a real shine to Herbology, and Molly encouraged it. His forays into the forest were beneficial to both the potions cupboard and the pantry.

"Molly?" Fleur called from the front room. "Are there really no pictures of Bill?"

Molly hurried in to find her oldest son bent over a difficult game of chess, looking chagrined. His lovely fiancée sat across from him, seeming perfectly at ease. Molly was still in shock from Bill's announcement. He'd introduced Fleur only a few weeks ago, and then one day he'd carried her out of the room, and the following weekend he had spoken to his parents very seriously about how much in love he was, and what his intentions were. Molly hadn't dared to believe it. But two days ago Bill had announced their formal engagement, and today here they were, as if they'd always been here.

Arthur had seemed strangely unsurprised by the sudden turn of events. "*We tend to fall hard, in this family,*" he'd said, when Molly had questioned him. "*Hard and fast. Bill's no different from me, I was just fortunate enough to strike gold earlier in my life, wasn't I? Rather like Ron, I imagine.*" And Molly had melted. In her opinion, any man who could make a speech like that off the top of his head ought to be Minister for the rest of his natural life.

"Pictures, dear?" Molly went to the large, uneven bookcase. It covered an entire wall and had been charmed several times to fit right under the uneven roof. It slanted steeply, and books fell against each other pell-mell, in all colors, shapes and sizes, packed together in no discernable order. But Molly put her hand on Bill's baby album in less than two seconds. "Would you prefer baby pictures? Childhood pictures? Photographs of him in school robes? Or would you like the album of our trip to Egypt, when he was a bit older?"

"All of them, please." Fleur gave Bill a wide, white smile across the chess table. "I knew there were photographs, you 'orrible liar."

"You'll be sorry you looked. I wasn't always this attractive."

Fleur laughed and came to the bookshelf to carry away the albums that Molly was more than happy to dig out.

"I kept all his old papers, as well," Molly whispered, patting Fleur's shoulder. "Very interesting reading, let me assure you. And his old drawings are filed away in the attic—I don't suppose he told you what an artist he used to be?"

"Were you an artist?" Fleur asked him, looking amused.

Bill gave his mother a dirty look. "No," he said, and went back to chewing his lip and studying a bishop. "Ah," he said suddenly. "There it is." He moved his bishop with decision and Fleur put the albums on the table. She returned to her chair to chew on her thumbnail and study the board.

"I've got you!" came a furious shout from the front garden. "You're going over the fence, you stupid gnome! That's what you get for biting my finger—"

"Look out!" Adam's voice was distinctive. "You almost hit me in the head!"

"Sorry, Adam."

"S'all right." The front door flew open and Adam cleared his throat. "J'ai les herbes," he announced.

"Tres bien!" Fleur cried. She clapped her hands. "Et les fleurs aussi?"

"Erm. Oui?" Adam held up a posy of foxgloves. "Are these the ones you wanted?"

"En Francais," Fleur rebuked.

"Erm... Est...no, wait. Tu a desire—never mind." Adam shook his head and waved Fleur off when she tried to help him. "No, I have to ask you some *new* words."

"D'accord. And yes, those are the ones I wanted, merci, Adam."

Adam deposited the foxgloves on top of the picture albums that lay stacked on the table and handed the basket of other herbs to Molly before he went to hover over Bill's shoulder. Molly thought it was positively dear, the way Adam worshipped Bill, and his new fascination with French was probably very good for him. After all, he wouldn't get a language course at Hogwarts.

"Did you bring the pictures?" Adam asked Fleur. "Er—avez-vous les photos?"

Fleur pointed to her bag, on the sofa, and Adam brought it to her. She opened it and took out two photographs, which she handed to him. "Be very careful, please."

"I will." Adam studied the pictures for a moment, then handed them back to Fleur, holding them carefully by the corners. "Thank you," he said seriously. "Merci."

Molly watched, proud of Adam's good manners in handling a delicate matter. Adam had asked several questions about Fleur's outburst, the other week, and though they had all warned him not to be nosy or hurtful, he had been terribly curious about Fleur's lost sister. Molly supposed it was natural. After all, he had lost his parents, and probably wanted to know about other people's losses, so that he had something to compare his to. He had asked to see pictures of Gabrielle, and Fleur had not seemed too upset, although she had forgotten to bring them more than once.

"How do you say 'follow me'?"

Fleur replaced the pictures in her bag and Molly watched, wishing that she felt comfortable asking to see them. But she didn't know Fleur well enough yet.

"Suivez moi."

Adam pulled a quill and crumpled bit of parchment out of his pocket. "Sweevay mwah," he repeated. He licked his lips.

"Taking notes today?" Bill grinned at him. "That's my boy."

Adam nodded. "How do you say 'Do you have a sister'?"

Fleur looked startled. She opened her mouth and shook her head. "It... depends on whom you are asking. If it is an adult, then 'Avez-vous une soeur?'"

"What do I say if it's my friend?"

"As-tu une soeur?"

"Ah too oon sur. Let me write that down." Adam scribbled on his parchment. "All right, and how do you say 'wait here?'"

"Attendez ici."

Adam scribbled again. "Merci!" he said, and ran out of the house.

"De rien!" Fleur called after him. "E is a sweet boy," she said quietly to no one, when he had gone.

"Yeah, he is." Bill took Fleur's hand under the table and caught her eyes. "And he's taken with you."

Molly retreated into the kitchen, not wanting to spoil their moment, and watched out the window for Ralph, who was a long time in returning. She was surprised to see Adam running back towards the woods without his basket, clutching his parchment in his hands. He was such a wonderful, strange child. She smiled and shook her head and focused on a little racing dot far up the road, knowing that it must have been Ralph.

Sure enough, Ralph hurtled into the Burrow at top speed a few minutes later, carrying two bags in his hands and a parcel under his arm. "I-need-a-wand-" he panted. "I-could have-made-this-stuff-weightless!" He dumped the groceries onto the kitchen table, along with Molly's change. "You got a-parcel-from-Harry Potter! Owl-ran-into me-in the-garden!"

Molly picked the parcel up and tore open the plain brown wrapping, wondering why Harry hadn't simply brought it over himself. And then she forgot to wonder anything at all. Harry had sent a pink satin princess hat. What on earth was the matter with him? She opened his note.

Dear Mrs. Weasley,

This ended up in my hands and I can't think what to do with it. Since you're inviting so many kids over to the Burrow (which I think is great, by the way- those kids are really lucky) I thought you might be able to give this to one of the girls, if there are any.

See you soon,

Harry

Molly pocketed the note and ran a wistful hand over the pointed pink hat. Harry had always been such a dear young man-almost like one of her own children, and certainly just as strange as the rest of them. It was just like him to send something along with someone else in mind. Molly only wished that there was a little girl here to enjoy it. She still felt terrible about Ella, who hadn't been in the Burrow for five minutes before she'd clawed her way out and sprinted away. No tracking spell had been able to find her, and no Muggle orphanage had taken her in. She hadn't returned to her hideout in Knockturn Alley, and St. Mungo's Children's Home had no idea where she was. Molly hadn't even had time to see her bathed and fed. She hoped that the child wasn't ill, or hurt-she hoped Ella was somehow surviving and that she would be found. But hope grew fainter all the time.

"Thank you for doing the shopping, Ralph," she said, returning her attention to the child who was there with her, and waiting for approval. "Why don't you go and help Matthew with the rest of the gnomes?"

"But I just—"

"I know. But I'll be outside in a minute with biscuits and juice, and we'll all take a nice, long break. How does that sound?"

Ralph must have thought it sounded good. He sprinted back outside, and Molly heard a gnome screech in terror. She laughed to herself and whipped together a batch of biscuits and a pitcher of juice, pleased with the progress her urchins were making. Floating the snacks in the air, she went out to the garden, wondering how it was possible to find a house too quiet, when there were four children and an engaged couple in it.

* * * * *

Bill wasn't sure what was more amazing—that he had actually fallen in love at first sight, or that he had very nearly thrown it away. He sat at the little chess table, listening to the chatter of boys in the garden, and felt so content that it frightened him. This couldn't be real, she hadn't said yes—he had to ask again. He had to see the proof.

"Give me your hand."

Fleur blushed and extended her left one, and Bill took it, gazing at the ring he'd put on her finger. It was modest. Not as much as she deserved. But she'd cried when he'd given it to her and she'd accepted it with such joy in her eyes that Bill wasn't sure he wanted to upgrade it. It was the ring he'd asked with, so it was the ring that mattered, and he knew that Fleur felt the same way.

"I'm in love with you." He turned over her hand and kissed the inside of her wrist.

She blushed more deeply. "Bill, please, it is your mother's house."

But that was half the fun. Furtively telling her such things, grabbing her hand under the table—he'd missed out on falling in love with her in school, when there was still a chance to sneak about and get caught in empty classrooms. He'd had girlfriends back then, and he knew what fun it was. He wished he'd had Fleur all along, but then, he supposed, part of her charm was that there was so much he had yet to find out about her. She was a mystery in so many ways, and *his* in all the essential ones. He couldn't believe how much time he'd wasted. Nearly a year. All because of her blood. It embarrassed him—he'd fought a war over similar prejudices, and his hypocrisy had only lately occurred to him.

"Fleur..." He moved his mouth further up her arm, bit by bit until his mouth rested on the tender skin that marked the inside of her elbow.

"Stop," she whispered, but she didn't pull her arm away. She only looked at him through half-lowered eyelids that made him want to get back to her flat in a hurry.

"Want to leave?"

"Non, I want to finish our game. And I want to see your baby photographs, do not think you can make me forget!"

"I can make you forget." He grinned up at her and abandoned her arm to reach across the table and take her face in his hands. He had just put his mouth to hers when a door swung open, and a distinctly English voice spoke very loud, bad French at the back of the house.

"Ah tan day ee see, all right? Look, just wait here—no, trust me! I should have asked how to say trust me."

"Avez confiance en moi!" Fleur called over her shoulder, and turned back to Bill, giggling. "'E is so cute. Who is 'e talking to?"

"Who knows?"

"Ah vay con fee ans en mwah, okay?" Adam said, still very loudly. "And ah tan day ee see. Great. See you in a minute—DON'T LEAVE." He came running into the room, red in the face as if he'd been running. "Fleur, I found someone," he said. "I think you—I hope—I—" He stopped and looked at Bill. "You know, it's probably better if I make sure I'm right, can you give me a minute?"

Fleur smiled indulgently, and Adam pulled Bill out of his chair and into the back hall of the Burrow. "I got Ella to come back here," Adam whispered, and jerked his thumb at the back door. "She's right out there."

Bill was shocked. "Adam, have you known where she was all along? My mum's been losing her mind!"

"I know but I couldn't do anything, I swear, I tried every day. I kept bringing her food—Bill, I think she's Gabrielle."

Bill clapped a hand over Adam's mouth. "Shut up," he hissed. "Don't say things like that, that's not the sort of thing you joke around—"

"Mf Mrr!"

"What?" Bill took his hand away.

"I'm not! I wouldn't joke!" Adam tossed back his fringe. "Why d'you think I wanted to see the pictures and learn the French? She's been staying in the abandoned barn out in the woods past the Quidditch glen because she doesn't trust grown ups and she hardly trusts me now that I let the M.L.E.S. drag her out of our spot in Knockturn Alley, but she's out there!"

Bill gazed down at Adam, full of wishful sadness. "You're great," he said quietly. "To think of Fleur like that. But her sister's been missing for a year and a half, and there's no way—they found her wand in that grave, you heard the story." Bill lowered his voice. "How would a thirteen year old from Mont Ste. Mireille get to London?"

"Won't you just look at her? Then you can ask whatever you want. I don't *know* how the hell—"

"Adam."

"Well this is worth swearing about!" Adam tugged Bill's sleeve and dragged him towards the back door. "Please, come on, you have to at least look—please, Bill, *please*."

There was no point in resisting. Especially if Ella was really outside. Bill let Adam tug him to the door and open it.

Bill looked at the filthy, bedraggled child who stood on flight-ready tiptoes on the back stoop of the Burrow, and he wished that she was Gabrielle. But this child was obviously... thinner. Dirtier. Taller. Older than the pictures Fleur had shown him. With the same piercing eyes. The same masses of filthy, but obviously very blonde hair all the way to her knees. The little bump on her nose. The double freckle right on the tip of the bump, which might have been dirt, but wasn't.

"Gabrielle?" Bill whispered. He couldn't allow himself to hope. Because it was... outrageous. It wasn't possible. And they couldn't afford to be wrong; it would kill Fleur. "Gabrielle Delacour?"

The little girl breathed hard, clearly ready to launch herself away from the house and sprint back to the woods at the first sign of trouble. She backed down steps, her sharp blue eyes darting from Bill to Adam and lingering on Adam as if to accuse him of lying. She stumbled off the bottom step, her hands out, and backed further from the house.

"Your sister's inside," Bill told her, hoping to stop her from running, but she continued to back away, checking over her shoulder to see where she wanted to go.

"Ta sore ay en the house," Adam translated at once, pointing to the house. "See, you have to know French. Ella doesn't really speak *anything*, but I heard her singing once, and I know it's the language she used to speak."

Bill stepped off the top stair and held out his hand. "Ella," he entreated. "Gabrielle." He took another step down.

As soon as his foot hit the bottom of the back steps, the little girl turned and ran flat out towards the woods.

"Catch her!" Adam shouted. "We have to catch her, because she won't go back to the barn after this and then I won't know where to find her!"

Bill ran. He couldn't remember ever running this fast; his lungs felt as though they were on fire and would burst at any moment. His legs pounded, jarring against the earth with every step. He heard his ragged breathing in his ears; he saw the little girl check over her shoulder, saw the terror register on her face as she realized he was gaining on her—amazingly, she put on more speed and flew ahead of him, out of his reach.

She had almost reached the woods before Bill remembered that he had a wand. He pulled it and pointed it at her disappearing back.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" he cried.

The little girl came to a sudden, frozen halt and toppled to the ground. Bill caught up with her and, though he felt terrible that he'd made her feel as horrified as she obviously was, he floated her into the air. She was stiff as a board.

"I'm sorry," he said, knowing that it was useless if she couldn't understand him. "I'm sorry. I'll explain later." Without wasting more time, he brought her back to the Burrow.

"Good job you had a wand!" Adam said, as Bill guided Ella's body forward and into the house.

"Good job I remembered it," Bill muttered. He floated the little girl into the back hall and stopped before he went into the front room. If this was Fleur's sister—if it, by some miracle, was truly Gabrielle—then this was not the reunion he wished for them. Not frozen and terrified. He set the girl on her feet and held her up by the shoulders, leaning her against the wall so that he could repeal the hex. "Don't run," he whispered to her, and then he raised his voice. "Fleur?"

"Yes?"

"Could you give me a hand?" He heard her chair move, heard her footsteps coming towards the hall. He swished and flicked, and released Gabrielle from the Full Body Bind, then blocked the hall as fast as he could. It was just fast enough. The moment she had her limbs back, the girl flung

herself at him and tried to escape once more.

"No, Ella, don't!" Adam shouted, behind him.

Fleur appeared at the other end of the corridor and gasped. "Mon Dieu," she said. "What is this? Who is this child?"

"The one who—ran away—" Bill managed, wincing as the girl threw herself against him again, not bothering to watch where her knees went. Or perhaps she was watching a little too well. She hit him again, and Bill doubled over in agony. "Ella," he wheezed. "I think she speaks French—help me out here—"

Fleur spoke commandingly and far too quickly for Bill to understand the French that she was using. But the little girl obviously got the point. She stopped her knee in midair and pulled it back, and Bill gasped gratefully. He wasn't sure he could have stood it again quite so soon.

Fleur spoke again and the little girl began to shake. Her eyes were still on Bill, but he was sure she wasn't seeing him; she had gone pale under the dirt on her face and her eyes, even brighter blue than Fleur's, swam with sudden tears. She took a half-breath and tried to speak, but nothing came out. She put out a grubby hand and leaned against the wall.

"Non," she whispered, keeping her back to Fleur. "Non, non. C'est un reve, c'est un reve, c'est seulement un reve—"

Fleur faltered. Bill watched her face as it catalogued every possible expression of shock and disbelief. "C'est un reve," she repeated in a whisper. "Seulement un reve..." She stood close to the wall and leaned her fingers lightly against it, at her hip, as if needing to support herself. "Gab..." she began, and stopped. She shook her head. "I am mad."

But the little girl didn't seem to think so. She turned slowly away from Bill to face Fleur. As if presenting herself, she pushed her hair behind her shoulders and wiped her hands across her cheeks. It could not have done much for her appearance, but she stood tall, with her chin in the air, and waited.

Fleur drew a strange, hissing breath. She began to reach out one hand. She leaned heavily against the wall, but it was not enough to hold her up. Seconds later, she had fallen to her knees. "Gabrielle?" she managed in a faint, terrified voice.

Bill couldn't see the little girl's face, but her voice was enough. "Fleur?" she managed on a cracked, dry breath. "Fleur?"

The sound that escaped Fleur was part laugh, part sob, part something Bill was sure was reserved for the afterlife. He stood back and watched in wonder as Fleur reached up her hands to her sister. When Gabrielle stumbled to her and fell into her arms Fleur gasped, closed her eyes, and clutched the girl to her heart. For a long time, it seemed she could do nothing at all; there was only mingled, ragged breathing, and an expression of ecstatic disbelief mingled with terrible, unbearable pain, and hands that trembled as they stroked and clutched at long, dirty blonde hair.

"Ils m'avaient dis que tu etais mort," Gabrielle choked, "Toi, et maman et papa—sont ils morts?"

Fleur pulled back, shaking. "Non," she whispered. "Ils ne sont pas morts." She took her sister's face in her hands, and her eyes were full of tears. "Gabrielle." She leaned her forehead to her sister's. "Ma petite, ma cherie, Gabrielle... c'est une miracle, c'est impossible—"

Gabrielle began to cry. She flung her arms around her sister's neck and broke down completely.

Fleur shut her eyes and began to speak in such rapturous, tearful, disjointed French that Bill had no idea what she was saying. He only knew that she had been given back one of the dead, and that she could not comprehend it. Just as he would not have been able to comprehend it if Percy had walked through the door.

Gabrielle huddled against Fleur, sobbing and clutching her. Fleur rocked her, still speaking quickly and jerkily, barely managing words through her own tears, running her hands over and over her sister's tangled hair and pulling away from her every so often to gaze at her face, say her name, kiss both her cheeks and clasp her close once more.

Bill slipped quietly past them and went to find his mother.

She was standing in the garden, giving a lesson on the magical significance of the flowers that grew there.

"Mum?" His voice was unsteady.

"Just a minute, Bill. Now, black-eyed Susans are wonderful for—"

"No, Mum. It's an emergency."

His mother whirled around. "Who's hurt, is it Adam?"

"No one's hurt—you boys can stay here and study." He held the door open for his mother and shut it behind her.

"What's the mat—"

"Shh." He gestured to the hall. "They're right there." Bill put a hand on her shoulder to stop her from charging to the back of the house. "Mum, the... most amazing thing just..." He tried to work his voice, but found it had got stuck in the back of his throat.

"Bill! Sweetheart, what is it?" His mother reached up, looking very anxious, and wiped away the tear that had just sneaked out of his eye.

"The little girl who ran away," he said jerkily. "Ella. Adam found her in that old barn where Charlie used to keep his animals."

"Out in the woods!" His mother's eyes flew wide. "All by herself, the poor little thing, is she hurt? Is she hungry?"

"No, she's—" Bill sniffed and swiped the back of his hand across his eyes. "Mum, she's Fleur's sister. She's Gabrielle Delacour. I don't know how it all happened, but they're in the back hall, they're—"

But his mother had gone stark white. She around him and hurried into the back of the house. Bill followed, and looked over her shoulder at the two girls who still sat on the floor, unaware of the world around them, wrapped around each other with their eyes closed, lost in joy. They clung together as if afraid they'd be separated again at any second.

"Mon ange," Fleur mumbled, stroking her sister's hair. "Mon ange."

"I'm going to get them a spot of tea," his mother whispered. "And put them to bed. With rest, they'll... recover from the shock."

Bill didn't think it was the sort of shock a person could ever recover from. He imagined that his heart wouldn't beat for several days, if Percy showed up alive and well. But he didn't stop his mother from going to get the tea, because he didn't have any better ideas. He stood and leaned against the wall, watching Fleur's face. Her eyes were closed, her face tense and tearstained. But light shone out of her, radiating around her, making the hallway strangely bright.

Beyond them, the back door stood open, and Bill remembered that there was someone outside who deserved enormous thanks. He passed Fleur without touching her—he didn't want to wake her from the dream of her sister—and went out into the yard. It was warm and comfortable outside; the long grass swayed in the breeze and across the gardens, the trees rustled. Bill shut the door behind him and went down the steps.

"Adam?" he called.

There was no reply but the clucking of chickens in the coop. Bill went around the side of the Burrow and looked in all directions. "Adam?" He went to the other side of the house and tried again, but to no avail.

"He's not here."

The voice had come from the front garden. Bill went to the front of the house and saw David pointing towards the woods.

"He ran down there after Molly went inside."

"Thanks," said Bill, and started walking in the direction that Adam had run. He knew where to find him, and after a half-hour's walk in the woods, Bill came upon a farm building even more ramshackle than the Burrow. Sure enough, from inside the dilapidated barn came the sound of someone crying as if he'd choke.

Bill stopped. Adam had taken everything in stride for weeks. When he'd found out the truth about his parents, he had accepted it almost cheerfully and never mentioned it again. He probably needed a good, hard cry, and Bill knew that if he opened the door Adam would try to compose himself. Most boys preferred to bury their tears alone.

So Bill sat down and waited. He waited nearly an hour for the sobs to subside, and all the while he thought back over his year. Last February he and Charlie had cried together. Fleur had cried for him. Penelope had sobbed at the Memorial Service, his mother had broken down several times, Ginny had lost it at Christmas and Bill couldn't remember the rest. There wasn't a person he knew—save Harry, perhaps—whom he hadn't seen sobbing his guts out. It had been a rough year. Rougher, perhaps, than the three years that had preceded it because during those years there hadn't been time for emotion, there hadn't been room for thought. It was all this *time* that compounded the losses, made them sharp, brought them into focus. People said that time made grief less painful, and Bill imagined it was true—but he knew that at first it only made things worse.

When several minutes of silence had passed inside the barn, Bill stood and knocked on the door.

"Adam, it's Bill. Are you in there?"

"No."

He wasn't sure what to say. He supposed he should have been out here thinking about that, but it was too late now. "Care for a chat?"

"No."

"Are you sure? You did something amazing just now, can't I thank you for it?" Bill waited for an answer. When there was only a wet sniff in reply, Bill knocked again. "I'm going to open this up then, in a minute, if you don't mind."

Taking Adam's continued silence as permission, Bill pushed open the door and grimaced. The place smelled like mildew and rotting straw and wet animal fur. Charlie had used to use it as a coop for all kinds of funny forest creatures, and some of them must have made this their permanent nesting ground. It was no fit place for a child, but then neither was a cellar in Knockturn Alley.

"Adam?"

Something rustled in the loft. Bill could just make out a moving bundle in the dark upper corner. He climbed the ladder and picked his way through the sodden straw towards Adam, who lay on his back in the driest spot, tangled in dirty blankets, staring puffy-eyed at the barn roof.

Bill sat in the straw beside him. "You all right?"

Adam snorted. "My parents are in prison," he said dully. "What do *you* think?"

It had been bound to hit him sooner or later, and Bill thought that sooner was probably better. But it was going to be horrible, no matter what. And it must have been difficult for Adam to see his friend reunited with her sister, only to know that he was never going to have that peace himself.

"I think you've been brave," Bill said.

"*Brave.*" The word was full of derision. "You sound like a Gryffindor."

"Well I am one." Bill shrugged. "But I'll tell you who won the House Cup this year, in my opinion."

"Who?"

"Slytherin."

Adam looked almost pleased, then snapped a piece of straw in half and threw it over the side of the loft. "Like it even matters," he muttered. "I have to go back to school and everyone's going to know what I am."

"What's that?"

"I'm a Hopewell. It's a Death Eater family. Everyone's going to hate me." He snapped another piece of straw. "I know how it goes. The only people who'll be my friends are people like me."

"Intelligent, interesting people?"

"Don't act like you don't know what I mean." Adam sat up and gave Bill a stare that did not belong to a thirteen-year-old. It was disturbingly adult. "My parents helped kill people. That's true, isn't it?"

Bill wished he could lie. "Yes."

"So what sort of person does that make me?"

"A completely different person with a completely different life ahead of him, and all his own choices to make," Bill said. "You've made some pretty good ones already—look what you did today."

Adam stuck out his chin and looked away. "But I'm not completely different from my parents." His jaw tensed. "I'm *not*. I read like my dad. My dad knew *everything*. And I do magic like my mum—my mum was an *Auror*."

"I know."

"If anyone says anything about them at school, I'll kick their stupid arses."

"Good."

Adam blinked hard. "They're really clever, they're really—I don't under—" He shook his head. "Why did they fight for You-Know-Who? His voice was tight and his eyes were very glassy. "*Why?*"

"Because..." Bill sighed. "Because they hold the belief that Muggle-born children have no place in the wizarding world. And they're not alone, Adam. Tens of thousands of wizards and witches still believe that. It's a common feeling, and some people were willing to stake lives on it. Their own, and other people's."

"Well if so many people believe it, then doesn't it have to be a little bit *right*?"

Bill looked carefully at Adam. That was the most dangerous thing he'd heard the boy say. But then again... "I suppose that's one of those decisions you'll have to make for yourself."

"But what do *you* think?"

"Me? I think magic's the same, regardless of blood." He moved closer to the edge of the loft, and sat facing the barn door. The sunlight was changing color, turning the light in the barn a deep gold. "I know that it can be a difficult belief to keep in mind. There are arguments that seem to make sense, and it's easy to be inconsistent. But I believe very, very strongly in equality, and that's why I fought against people like..." He stopped. "Against people who didn't agree."

"And your side won, so your side gets to decide who was right and who goes to prison."

Bill raised his eyebrows. "I suppose in a way... that's how wars work. Two sides fight for what they believe, and the side that wins—"

"Gets to stay in power until someone else stronger comes along."

Bill whistled. "Damn."

Adam crawled to the edge of the loft to sit beside Bill. He dangled his legs over the side and looked sideways at him. "What?"

"You really are a clever one, you know that?"

"Yes." Adam leaned back on his hands.

"But I'll tell you something, Adam. Evil wizards will never stop trying to take over the wizarding world—to separate the cultures, or to serve their own interests. Voldemort wasn't the first one, and he won't be the last. You'll see another in your lifetime, and so will I, I imagine. More than one. Perhaps even several. And every time, people will take sides and fight."

"But the same people won't always win."

"In the end? Yes they will." Bill pulled up his knees and rested his elbows on them, letting his forearms dangle. "That's the great secret of the universe. Greater than magic, or love, or any of it. Good wins."

"But Dark wizards have come to power and stayed in power for years and years."

"Sometimes it takes longer than others to throw them off," Bill agreed. "And there are terrible sacrifices. But what always happens in the end?"

"The Dark wizards get killed." Adam pushed a lot of straw over the edge of the loft and they both watched it drift to the ground. "And their supporters get punished."

Bill nodded. "So when the next war comes, and you're deciding what you want to fight for—"

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Good. And while you're keeping that in mind, you'll want to sort out a few other things."

Adam glanced at him. "Like?"

"Like what's right and what's wrong. Fighting for survival is important, but in the end, you want to fight for what you *believe*."

Adam was quiet for a while. He seemed to be thinking very hard about something, and then he bent his head. A few minutes later, he turned away and tried to wipe his eyes without Bill seeing him.

Bill looked away and studied the wall. There was a long silence.

"They're not ever getting out," Adam asked quietly. "Are they?"

"No."

"Am I... allowed to see them?"

Bill glanced back at him. Adam had drawn one knee up under his chin, and he busied himself with his shoelace.

"When all the charms are in place at Culparrat, and your parents are awake, I'll take you to see them. All right?"

Adam nodded without looking up.

"What do you say we go back and eat dinner?"

Adam nodded again and followed Bill down the ladder.

The woods were cool now, and the sky was growing dark. Above them, stars assumed their places in the heavens, and Bill felt almost as he had as a boy, walking home to dinner with Charlie. So much had changed, since then. But these trees hadn't. The stars hadn't. Time was the strangest element.

"So I suppose I'll keep living with your mum and dad," Adam said, when they'd been walking for nearly half an hour.

"What have they said about it?" Bill asked.

"They said I've got living relatives—just cousins related by marriage and things. No one's got a legal obligation to take me." Adam kicked a rock. "Or a legal right. But Arthur said he'll ask my family to consider it, if that's what I want."

"And what do you want?"

Adam shrugged and pushed a branch out of the way. "The Malfoys have a massive house. I've been over there for parties."

"You'll have a massive house yourself, someday."

"Will I?" Adam stopped walking. "What do you mean?"

"Well, except for your parents' house, which belongs to you now, all their assets have been liquidated—turned back into Galleons, essentially—and put in a vault for you. It'll collect interest for

the next five years, until you're finished with school."

"So I'm rich?"

Bill laughed. "Well you won't be hurting for money." They continued walking. "So you like the Malfoys' house, do you?"

Adam shrugged. "Yes, but I'd rather..."

"Hm?"

"Well, I'd rather go to Egypt with you," Adam said quickly, sounding almost shy. He kept his eyes straight ahead.

Bill was touched. He threw an arm around Adam's shoulders. "It'd be hard to commute to Hogwarts, from Egypt," he said seriously. "But I hope you'll visit often. Come next summer and I'll take you through the pyramids."

"Honestly?"

"Of course."

Adam's face lit up. "Cool," he said, and ran ahead of Bill towards the Burrow, which had just come into view. "Guess I'll just live here then," he shouted over his shoulder as he ran.

"Good," Bill said softly, and broke into a jog.

He caught up with Adam in the front door of the Burrow, where Adam had come to a dead halt and now stood slack-jawed, staring into the front room. Bill followed his gaze—and grinned.

Gabrielle sat on the sofa gesturing wildly with her hands and chattering nonstop to Fleur, who sat in rapt attention. But Gabrielle no longer bore the traces of Ella. She had bathed. Her silvery hair was brushed. She wore clean clothing—it must have been some of Ginny's old stuff—and her face was alight with happiness. Far from the filthy, bedraggled child who had appeared in the Burrow that afternoon, she now looked like nothing less than a fairytale princess.

"Whoa," said Adam.

Gabrielle stopped talking and turned her head towards the door so fast that her hair flew out around her.

"Adam!"

"Y-yes?"

Gabrielle jumped up and ran to the door in a heartbeat. She flung her arms around Adam, hugged him tight, and spoke in rapid, breathless French. Bill only understood a few words of her outburst—her parents were coming, she was happy, she was grateful—and he was sure that Adam didn't understand any of it. He was also sure it didn't matter in the slightest. When Gabrielle pulled away, she looked into Adam's face for a long moment and then ran back to her sister.

Adam swayed on the spot, blushing so hard that Bill could feel him radiating.

"All right there, Adam?" Bill asked, biting back his amusement.

"She... she didn't used to *talk*," was all Adam said. He weaved his way across the room to the stairs and disappeared slowly up them, a dazed look on his face.

Bill knew the feeling.

* * * * *

"Checkmate."

Hermione sighed and clapped her thumb over the mouth of Harry's laughing queen. "Best of three?" she asked him. "Unless you don't feel like playing two more games."

"It'll just be one." Harry looked horribly tired, but he smiled a little and began to set up the board.

The grandfather clock chimed loudly and Hermione winced; she didn't want Harry to realize that it was six o'clock, which meant that Ginny would appear at any moment.

In the week since he had defended Ginny in the kitchen, Harry had taken to coming over after his shifts nearly every day to play chess, or to borrow books, or to ask Hermione questions that she was fairly sure he knew the answers to. He always looked as though he would rather have been asleep than awake—in fact, he had dozed off more than once. But tired or not, he always came between five and six, when Ginny was at St. Mungo's, and he always left before she came home. But right now he seemed very absorbed in getting the chess pieces turned just so, and whether he had gone deaf to the clock on purpose or was simply too exhausted to notice the time, Hermione wasn't going to snap him out of it.

"How's it going at Culparrat?" Harry asked, as the chime vibration died away.

"Very well. I hardly have anything to do." Hermione watched him put the pawns in the exact centers of their squares. "I thought the elves would need more direction, but they're very efficient."

Harry glanced up. "Oh, are they already there?" he asked, and looked back at the board. "Don't they spend all their time worshipping you?"

"Of course not!" Hermione crossed her arms and huffed. "They're just *respectful*. That poor little one that used to belong to the Malfoys is there, and she's looking *much* better. I'm so glad Seamus thought to report that. That was really good of him."

Harry snorted. "He was probably afraid you'd come after him with a treasury box and a manifesto."

"And Fleur leads the Charms team," Hermione said loudly, ignoring him. "And Bill arranged a group of Curse Breakers he trusts to come and test the spell walls once they're in place. Which leaves very little for me to do."

Harry had finally positioned all the pieces. His hand hovered over the pawns as he studied the board, and Hermione narrowed her eyes. Was he stalling? Was he hoping to see Ginny?

"So you just sit around sunning yourself, or what?" Harry asked, meditatively patting a pawn on the head.

"Not exactly." Hermione sighed. "Would you *go*!"

Harry moved a white pawn.

"I've been helping the Aurors where I can. They don't really need me either, but I've had some ideas about which levels certain prisoners ought to be assigned, based on the structure of the Imprisonment Enchantment—"

"Can it be broken in some places?"

"Well, no," Hermione admitted, picking up Crookshanks, who had just rubbed against her legs. "But the more serious the crime, the higher up the criminal. Just in case. It's harder to escape from a turret than from a ground floor."

"Unless you've got a hippogriff."

They exchanged a secret smile, and Hermione moved the black pawn that was closest to the edge of the board. It hung its round, faceless little head as soon as she touched it, as if resigning itself to its fate.

"I rather like working with the Aurors," Hermione said, scratching Crookshanks behind his ears and making him purr. "Moody even asked me if I have an interest in the area."

"And do you?"

"Well, yes, but I'm interested in everything." Hermione stroked thoughtfully beneath Crookshanks's chin. "There's just so much to choose from, isn't there?"

"What about Thinking?" Harry rested his finger on another pawn and frowned.

"It's strange," Hermione said. "I never thought I'd like it as much as I do... I just wanted to help my parents, but I think I've helped them all I can." She was quiet for a moment, and Harry glanced up at her.

"The rest is up to Ginny, then?"

Hermione raised an eyebrow, and Harry looked down and became extremely interested in sliding his pawn from one square to another.

"What's it like working with Fleur?" he asked, still not looking at her.

"She's... well, actually, she's great." Hermione shrugged. She had forgotten how to dislike Fleur, somewhere along the way. She knew they'd never be great friends, but she couldn't think of anything negative to say about her. "She's a hard worker, and she's clever, and a very, *very* powerful witch. I'm really impressed with the way she's handled this enchantment—and obviously it helps that she and Bill are such a good team."

"Er—yeah." Harry shook his head. "That's one way to put it. First Percy, then Fred, now Bill... wonder who'll be next?" he asked innocently. He gave Hermione a meaningful look and tapped the board. "Your move, isn't it?"

Hermione flushed. She dearly wished she could turn his suggestion around on him, but teasing him about Ginny while they were still at odds seemed a bit cruel. She pressed her mouth shut and moved another pawn.

"It's wonderful about Fleur's sister, though," Harry said, after a minute had passed in silence. "She must have been..." He paused. "I can't even imagine."

"No. I know." They shared another smile, but it was halfhearted, and Hermione was glad when she heard a noise from the kitchen and smelt something marvelous wafting in from the corridor. It made her suddenly hungry.

"Fried dinner," said Harry, taking one of Hermione's pawns. "Who's cooking?"

"Dunno," she said lightly. "But it can't be Remus. He's in the study."

Harry straightened slightly and put a hand through his hair as footsteps approached the front

room from the direction of the kitchen.

But it was Sirius who popped his head in. "I picked up dinner in Diagon Alley," he said. "Thought you'd be here, Harry. Help yourself, there's plenty. Where's Remus?"

Harry slumped back to his normal posture. "In the study."

"What were you doing in Diagon Alley?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

Sirius shrugged. "My suspension means I can't hold trials. I can still get a bit of work done, and Ron can use the help."

"Where is Ron?" Hermione asked.

"He's er... still at the office." Sirius gave her an apologetic smile. "He says he won't sleep till Malfoy's case is prepared, so he's been collecting and writing out eyewitness accounts of June thirtieth."

"Sounds like a great time," Harry muttered. "He's worked too much since Malfoy went to prison. I don't know why he doesn't just leave him there for awhile and prepare the case really slowly."

"I think," Sirius said, "Ron will be happier knowing that Malfoy is alive and in hell."

Hermione didn't like the corner of herself that burned with satisfaction at the idea of Malfoy alive and in hell, but she couldn't help it. Recklessly she moved one of her pawns, and was unsurprised when Harry took that one too.

"Are either of you hungry, or should I put the food away?"

"No, we're hungry. Come on, Harry." Hermione pushed Crookshanks off her lap and stood.

Sirius disappeared, but Harry stayed in his chair. He was looking at his watch.

"Do you have to go?" Hermione asked, disappointed. She had hoped that, since he'd stayed this long, he would stay long enough to see Ginny.

"No..." Harry drummed his fingers on the table, glanced up at Hermione and looked back down. "She's not usually late coming back from work, is she?"

So he *was* waiting. Hermione kept her voice even and tried not to show her delight. "No, she's never late."

"It's half six." Harry looked at his watch again. "Do you think she's all right?"

Hermione stifled a smile. It was good to see him like this. "Yes, I'm sure she's fine. Perhaps she stopped somewhere for something—or she could be upstairs. Sometimes she lies down for a bit, after working. Would you like me to check?"

Harry shook his head, then nodded at once. "I-I know I'm being stupid, I just—"

"No, it's all right!" Lighthearted for Ginny's sake, Hermione hurried upstairs and peeked into their room. But it was dark, and no one was there. Slowly, Hermione went back towards the front room, wondering how long she could get Harry to stay, and just what his intentions were. Perhaps he had come tonight to talk to Ginny. It was about time.

"I... well I'm all right, thanks."

At the sound of Ginny's voice in the front room, Hermione stopped on the top step and listened. She told herself she wasn't eavesdropping; she only wanted to be sure that she didn't interrupt.

"How have *you* been?"

"Not so well," Harry said, very quietly.

Hermione was shocked. She tried to remember a time when Harry had flat-out admitted that he wasn't doing well. She drew a blank.

"Oh..." Ginny was very quiet too. "I... oh, Harry—"

"No, Ginny, let me—"

Hermione held her breath.

"Wait," Ginny interrupted. "I can't do this now. I want to—I *really* want to—but Harry, it's the Grangers. They're close. They're *so* close. I swear they're about to wake up."

A loud, dull, thudding noise filled Hermione's ears. It was a moment before she recognized it as her heartbeat. She gripped the banister.

"It's much sooner than I expected—where's Hermione? She should come to St. Mungo's with me, I might need her help. And where's Remus, I want to tell him I'm breaking our schedule because I just can't lose momentum, I have to go back there right now and I'm going to stay until I see it through." Ginny spoke rapidly, barely stopping for breath. "It could happen tonight."

Hermione sank down to sit on the stairs. Tonight. It could happen tonight. She suddenly wanted Ron very much.

"And someone'll have to find Ron," Ginny continued. "I didn't want to leave them at all, but I need a change of clothes and something to eat—I'm already getting tired, it's so hard—"

"Go." Harry's voice was steady and full of purpose. "I'll tell Ron. I'll get your bag packed and

bring it with your dinner, and I'll get Hermione—"

"And will you tell Remus?"

"Yes."

"Harry." Ginny's voice was full of relief. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me—just go."

There was a soft *pop!* and Harry raced up the stairs, nearly tripping over Hermione in the dark.

"Your parents," he said urgently, extending his hand to her. "They're—"

"I know..." Hermione blinked up at him, too stunned to lie. "I heard everything."

Harry pulled back slightly. "Were you listening in on us?"

Hermione nodded and took the hand he offered. He pulled her to her feet.

"Then we're even," Harry said, and pushed her towards her room. "I accidentally saw yours and Ron's first kiss—from the dormitory stairs, actually—bet you didn't know that," he called.

Hermione hardly heard him. She vaguely noticed that he was going through Ginny's bureau drawers and stuffing things into a bag, but she didn't pay much attention. She wandered slowly to her closet and pulled out a set of robes. Blue ones. Her mother had always liked her in blue. She took socks and knickers from her bureau and crumpled it all into her rucksack, then went down the hall to get her toothbrush, listening to Harry bolt back down the stairs.

She stopped in front of the mirror and rested her hands on either side of the sink. It wouldn't do to expect anything. Ginny had no real idea what she was doing; she'd told Hermione again and again that even if her parents woke, she didn't know what condition they'd be in. Hermione knew it all, in her head. She understood it perfectly, it made logical sense, it was filed in order and she had to be rational now more than ever.

But it could be tonight.

She studied her own eyes for a moment; they were full of the anguished hope she wouldn't let herself feel. She looked down into the sink and silently repeated the hard truths that would save her from crushing disappointment. *They've been comatose for a long time. No one's ever completely recovered from Cruciatus madness. They're non-magic. They were affected worse than a witch and wizard would have been. They won't recognize you. They won't recognize you. Remember how the Longbottoms behave towards Neville. Even if they wake, they're going to be mad, Hermione. Even if they wake, they're going to be mad.*

She took her toothbrush from the holder, put it into her bag, and went downstairs. Harry came into the front room from the kitchen holding a bag of groceries, with Remus right behind him.

"Give me the food, Harry. Hermione, have you eaten?"

Hermione didn't know where her voice had gone.

"She hasn't," Harry answered for her, "and there's enough in there for both of them. I'm going to get Ron, all right, Hermione?" He put his hand on her shoulder. "All right? It's going to be okay. We'll see you at St. Mungo's in just a minute."

Harry was gone.

Remus quickly crossed the room and put a hand beneath Hermione's elbow. She realized she'd been just about to fall. The room spun. She was dizzy and afraid. "I'm trying not to get my hopes up," she said. Her voice felt thick and sounded far away. "Because I know how unlikely it is. I do know. I'm very realistic. I've kept it in mind all the time." She looked absently around the room. "They'll probably be in hospital forever. But if they wake up... I'll... move home with them." She hadn't thought about that before. She hadn't been home except once. She wondered how long it would take to repair the damage that the Death Eaters had done to the house; she couldn't move her parents back without taking care of all of it. If they should be awake... really awake... then she didn't want them to have any reminders.

"I don't think you should Apparate," Remus said gently. "Are you all right to use the fireplace?"

Hermione nodded and let him guide her into it. He threw the powder in for her, and green flames rose high.

"St. Mungo's," Hermione managed, and Lupin Lodge flickered out as the world began to spin.

A/N: This chapter is dedicated to all the loyal readers who guessed this was coming. Isn't it fun to be right? Thanks to the Roxin' Michelle Ravel for the French translations. (English translations are at the end.)

And thanks to the indefatigable beta readers: Cap'n Kathy, Caroline, CoKerry and Firelocks

A/N II:

"J'ai les herbes" means "I have the herbs"

"Et les fleurs aussi?" means "And the flowers too?"

"C'est un reve, c'est un reve, c'est seulement un reve" means "It's a dream, it's a dream, it's only a dream"

"Ils m'avaient dis que tu etais mort... Toi, et maman et papa—sont ils morts?" means "They told me you were dead... You and Mum and Dad. Are they dead?"

“Non. Ils ne sont pas morts.” means “No. They’re not dead.”

“Ma petite, ma chérie... c’est une miracle, c’est impossible” means “My little one, my sweet one... it’s a miracle, it’s impossible.”

“Mon ange” means “My angel”

— CHAPTER FOURTY —

Ron's Secret

Twenty-four hours later, Harry hovered in the doorway of the Grangers' room with Ron, watching Ginny. He and Ron had slept in hallway chairs, and even Hermione, who was the only one Ginny had allowed into the room, had slept a little. But Ginny had stayed awake, and it was wearing on her; there were shadows on her face, and her eyes were glazed and bloodshot. Her mouth hung open as she moved between the Grangers' beds, massaging sections of air with her hands and stopping every so often to lay her palm on one of their foreheads.

"Come on." Ginny rested her thumbs between Mrs. Granger's eyebrows and rubbed her fingertips against her temples. "It's all right. There's nothing to be afraid of." Ginny lifted her hands, closed her eyes, and drew her hands away from Mrs. Granger as if she were pulling away an invisible skin. "They're gone. You're safe."

Mrs. Granger did not stir. Harry knew that Ginny was privy to feelings that the rest of them were not, but from the outside, the Grangers didn't seem any different. Ginny suddenly backed away from Mrs. Granger's bed and put her hands over her eyes. "Stop," she muttered. "Stop it."

"Ginny, are you all right?" Hermione whispered. She started to get out of her chair.

"I can't have the door open," Ginny said, rubbing her eyes. "I can't separate things anymore. I'm losing focus. Shut the door, Ron, and stay out in the hall. I'm sorry."

Ron did as he was told and sank into one of the hallway chairs. He looked ill and tired, and his freckles, like Ginny's, stood out on his skin. Harry sat next to him.

"My mum's going to want to know about this," Ron said after a minute, in a scratchy voice.

"Probably better to wait," Harry said.

"I know." Ron leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees and put his face in his hands. "I can't get that day out of my head. I can't get that look on her face out of my *head*, this has to *work*."

Harry couldn't stop remembering it either. Watching Hermione lose her parents had been hell.

"I hate being helpless." Ron shoved his fingers into his hair and looked at the floor. "You know I've been trying to find something on Malfoy, for this. And I can't—there's nothing."

"He might not have known about it."

"The hell he didn't!" Ron barked. "They'd never have targeted her family if it hadn't been for him and his father. There was no other reason."

Except that she's one of my closest friends. But Harry didn't say the words out loud. Ron would only have denied that it was true, and it didn't help anyone anyway.

"How can Ginny not tell me what she knows?" Ron sat up and his head thunked back against the wall. "It's *Malfoy*."

"Perhaps she doesn't know anything."

"Oh, she knows something. I know the look she gets when she's hiding something."

So did Harry. He remembered the first time he'd seen it, at the Gryffindor table. She'd been twelve, and pensive, and rocking in her seat. "She's doing what she thinks is right."

"Keeping her *contract*." Ron snorted in disgust. "Let me tell you, if their situations were reversed and *I* was the one about to be on trial, Malfoy would have thrown out his contract in a dirty great hurry."

Harry knew it was true, but that didn't change things. "That's because he's got no integrity," he snapped. "Do you really want Ginny to throw away her word for *him*? You can't ask her to compromise."

Ron turned a narrow look on him. "Made it up with her, have you?"

Harry clenched his jaw. "That is *not* the point," he said through gritted teeth.

"Yes or no?" Ron demanded.

"Forget it," Harry said. "Besides, you don't need Ginny's help—I thought you already had evidence on Malfoy."

The change of tack worked. Ron's face darkened and he slumped back. "I'm not supposed to talk about it," he said. "But as I've got nothing solid, I suppose it doesn't matter."

"Nothing?" said Harry, surprised.

"It's all indirect. It's all just suggested." Ron breathed hard through his nose. "There's nothing at all on his mother—she's going to go free, and that... doesn't bother me much. But I *know* that Malfoy told his dad to attack Hermione's parents. I *know* he gave his dad our hairs—or whatever he gave him to make those Polyjuice Potions, but I can't show my gut feelings to a jury, there's no witness, there's no *proof*." He brought a fist down on the arm of his chair. "And Mrs. Zabini's not talking—and neither's Mrs. Malfoy, of course. So all I can do is keep Malfoy detained until all the trials are finished—and that'll be another year at least—but if I haven't got anything on him by then..." He shook his head. "It's just not right, Harry. They threw twelve good years of Sirius's life away without blinking an eye, and now here's Sirius telling me that we don't have enough evidence to convict *Malfoy*? It's just not right." He paused. "I've just got one thing. One scrap of proof that might do it. I was talking to Sirius about the last day of the war and he says he remembers—" Ron stopped short and pressed his mouth shut.

Harry waited on edge, fairly sure that he wasn't supposed to ask and that Ron wasn't supposed to tell him.

"I want to tell you." Ron was red-eared and tight-lipped. "Damn stupid secrecy, I'm no good at it—how can I not tell *you* stuff? I'd rather go on a month-long fast or stop watching Quidditch, I swear—"

Ron stopped, mid-rant, and jumped to his feet. He strode around Harry's chair to the door of the Grangers' room.

"Hermione," he said urgently. "What is it?"

Harry hadn't even heard the door open, but he looked up to see Hermione closing it behind her with a very shaky hand. She stood against it, looking gaunt and shadowed, just as she'd looked on the night they'd first brought her parents here. "Ginny said she has to be alone," she said, leaning her hand on the doorknob. "She said I'm too anxious to stay in the room. I—I'm not supposed to go back in there."

Ron put an arm around her waist and guided her to sit between him and Harry. Hermione leaned against Ron and reached out for Harry's hand; he took it and held it in both his own. Hers was small, damp and cold.

For a long time, Hermione seemed to have fallen asleep between them. Ron stroked her hair and Harry kept hold of her hand. Orderlies passed and gave them sympathetic looks. The Head Cursologist approached to ask how the work was going inside, and Ron said very quietly that it wasn't finished and that they'd alert the appropriate mediwizards as soon as there was any development.

Harry had just leaned his neck against the back of the chair and shut his eyes when Hermione stirred.

"Do you... remember the troll?" she asked, very faintly.

"First year? In the toilet?" Ron laughed and ruffled her hair. "What made you think of that?"

"I don't know." Hermione sighed a little, sounding sleepy. "Just that the two of you are... still here with me. For everything. And I expect you always will be."

Both of them turned to look at her, then met each other's eyes over her head. Harry held Ron's gaze for a minute in which, somehow, time seemed to rush backwards.

"Remember the chess match?" Harry said, and his voice seemed distant in his ears.

Hermione sighed again. "Oh yes. And the potion bottles." She smiled a little. "I never told you, did I, how scared I was that I had got it wrong?"

"Remember the car?" Ron put in. "Flying to school? Brilliant."

"But the Whomping Willow wasn't."

"I remember riding all the way to school by *myself*," Hermione said, sounding wounded. She burrowed into Ron's shoulder.

Ron rolled his eyes at Harry over her head. "Aw, she's still sad, Harry."

"We were thinking of you all the time, Hermione."

She already looked happier. More awake. "Oh, oh, remember Fluffy?" Hermione giggled. "*Fluffy*. And Norbert. And Buckbeak—Hagrid was so mad."

Ron snorted. "Remember when Buckbeak gored Malfoy's arm?"

"And he whined like a sissy?" Harry added.

"And you tried to curse him?" Hermione elbowed Ron.

"And you slapped the hell out of him?" Ron returned.

"And Hermione beat him in all his subjects?"

"And Harry in all his matches."

Harry squeezed her hand, warming up to the memories. There were so many, and they came so fast, tumbling down from his brain and waking up his heart. "What about the wizard's duel we never got to have?"

"Yeah you did, in Lockhart's club." Ron tickled Hermione. "Oooh, *Lockhart*."

"Shush! I was about to remember how wonderful you were with Buckbeak's case, but just never mind."

"No, that's good, remember that! And I'll remember when you stole the cloak back from the tunnel." Ron sighed happily.

"Kind of like the time she stole from Snape."

"To brew an illegal Polyjuice Potion."

"She set Snape on fire, too, as I recall."

"Damn right she did." Ron gave Hermione a loud, smacking kiss on her forehead, and she made a pleased noise. "She's a maniac, this one. Just think of *spew*."

For once, Hermione didn't protest. "Remember when I dropped Divination?" she demanded.

Harry and Ron exchanged a grin.

"Never prouder," Ron said. "Except perhaps when you turned yourself into a cat."

She scowled, then brightened. "Remember the deathday party?"

"Well, who could forget the way Myrtle fancied Harry?"

"Oi, shut up." Harry smirked. "How about the way Viktor Krum fancied—"

"Potter, I'm warning you. Unless you want to be reminded of the fact that *you* used to date my girlfriend, according to the newspaper."

Hermione snickered. "Ah yes," she said, looking up at Harry and batting her eyelashes. "Those were the days, weren't they, Harry?"

Harry knew he was red, but he was snickering too. "Wish I could remember them. We must've been dating while you were Petrified."

"Well, that was the only time I was free."

Ron's ears went pink, and he grinned. "We all spent our share of time in the hospital wing, didn't we? Harry and I practically had to carry you up there after the last O.W.L. exam."

Hermione huffed. "You did *not*."

"Er, yeah, we did," said Harry, recalling what a wreck of nerves Hermione had been.

"I used to think Madam Pomfrey would give you a permanent bed in there, Harry," Ron continued. "The number of nights you spent in that place."

"Oh, I win *easily* on the number of nights," Hermione said. "First I turned into a cat, then I was Petrified... we *all* had to go in after we went through the trapdoor... and then again after the Dementors tried to kiss Sirius—"

"Right, when my leg was broken," said Ron. "The year before that, I had to get checked over after we came up from the Chamber of Secrets, and before *that* I had to go in for the dragon bite—"

"And I went in there for my teeth." Hermione smiled, showing them off. "I was so thrilled when Madam Pomfrey shrank them."

"Why? They were fine," Ron said.

Hermione looked at him as if he'd just said he enjoyed eating spiders.

"Well they *were*," he insisted. "You looked really eager all the time, and they just sort of... added to it."

"They made me look like a beaver, you mean."

Ron snorted loudly, apparently before he could stop himself, and Harry sat back to avoid Hermione's arm as she flailed to smack Ron.

"Hey! I think you're gorgeous, don't I?" He fended her off. "Who did I ask to the ball in fifth year? Who'd I get up the nerve to kiss?"

"Took you long enough!" Hermione said tartly, and then her eyes widened. "Ron, did you know that Harry *saw* our first kiss? He told me last night."

Ron reddened and looked at Harry over Hermione's head. "Did you really?" he asked.

Harry, who was just glad that they were no longer sharing memories of the hospital wing, was happy to tell the truth. "It was disgusting," he said, and leaned back again as Hermione whirled toward him in her chair. "Joking," he said quickly. "Just joking."

Hermione sighed, and the sound was half-annoyed and half-excited. "I love this," she said. "I love remembering these sorts of things, and we never do it. I remember so much, sometimes I think I need a Pensieve."

"You remember everything," Ron said. "You probably *do* need to get a Pensieve, before your head explodes."

"I don't remember *everything*," Hermione began modestly.

"Erm, Professor?" Ron's hand shot into the air and he spoke in a rapid, breathy voice, tossing his head as if he had a lot of bushy hair that was getting in his eyes. "Please, Professor, I know exactly how many times Devlin Whitehorn breathed in 1958, yes, of course I read that, hasn't everyone? I mean, it *exists*, so I've committed it to memory, isn't that the normal thing to do?"

It was such a remarkable impression that both Harry and Hermione gaped at him for a moment, and then Hermione said, rather weakly, "Who... is Devlin Whitehorn?"

"He designed the Nimbus," Harry and Ron said together.

Hermione laughed. "And *I'm* the know-it-all?" She tucked her arms into theirs and let out a long, happy sigh. "Remember our boat ride to Hogwarts?"

The three of them went quiet together, and Harry's heart beat hard and fast. He remembered it in detail. The way the spiraling towers had looked in the darkness—like something in a dream. And all of it theirs. He felt that it belonged to them more than it ever had to anyone. He almost wished he could go back to the beginning, no matter how hard some of it had been, and live it all over again.

"The first time we ever saw Gryffindor," Ron said quietly. "Remember that?"

Harry only nodded. He didn't trust his voice. He had never been home before that day, and he still felt he belonged there.

"I miss it," Hermione whispered.

"Me too."

"So do I."

Hermione looked from Ron to Harry with red-rimmed eyes and when she spoke her voice trembled. "I can get through anything as long as I've got the two of you," she said.

Ron looked down and sniffed.

Harry looked away and blinked hard.

"Thank you for being here." She tightened her arms around theirs.

"Of course."

"Not a question."

She sniffled. "I love you both."

Neither Harry nor Ron answered, but Harry knew that Hermione didn't really want them to. He felt a brief and unexpected kiss on his cheek, and kept his face turned away as Hermione gave Ron a very different kind of kiss. She relaxed after that, slipped her arm out of Harry's to take his hand once more, and went back to leaning against Ron.

"I really should tell Ginny to stop," she said quietly. "She's completely exhausted. And I know it's futile. I know that."

Ron kissed Hermione's head and didn't answer.

"At least they're peaceful." Hermione gave a half-smile. "That's something."

"That's *huge*." Ron smoothed her hair.

Harry was so absorbed in patting Hermione's hand and trying to decide how to help her that when Remus came down the hall with biscuits and water he thought he was an orderly. It took him awhile to focus on what was being offered to him.

"Eat. You're all starved."

But not even Ron took the food, and eventually Remus gave up, put the biscuits on another chair, and leaned against the wall in front of them. He yawned widely. "How is Ginny managing in there?"

Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged looks.

"She's tired," Hermione finally said. "I know she doesn't want to give up, but..."

"But they don't look any different, to you. You think it's hopeless."

Hermione nodded.

"Well, in any case, she's gone far too long without sleep. I doubt she'll be able to do them much good at this point." Remus yawned again and scratched his head. "But it doesn't mean she has to give up entirely, Hermione. In fact I'm sure that when she's rested she'll want to—"

"Hermione!"

Harry, Ron and Hermione sat bolt upright and stared at the door. They could hear Ginny's muffled shout through the thick hospital walls. She sounded urgent. Excited.

"No," Hermione whispered. "No, I won't jump to conclusions."

"Hermione, hurry!"

Hermione stayed between Harry and Ron for another moment, shaking her head and gripping their hands. "I can't get my hopes up. I can't," she repeated. "I can't, I can't."

But she obviously had. A second later, she tore her arms away from theirs, shot out of her chair and ran back into her parents' room. Harry and Ron shared a fearful, hopeful look and hurried back to their posts in the doorway, with Remus just behind them.

Ginny's hands were pressed to Mrs. Granger's chest, just above her heart. She moved one palm to her patient's brow and shut her eyes, clearly intent on sensing something. She leaned very close, almost as if listening to Mrs. Granger's mind, then stepped away and motioned for Hermione. "Come and talk to her, she's listening," she managed, and went around to the far side of Mr. Granger's bed, where she repeated her actions.

Hermione hurried to her mother's side and Ron followed. "Mum?" she began, her voice tight with anxiety. "Mum, can you hear me? It's Hermione. It's me. I love you so much. Can you hear me? I'm right here."

Ron followed close behind her and stood with a hand on the small of her back. Harry moved into the room a step, watching Mrs. Granger's face. It was entirely still and slack, and her eyes were mercifully closed as they had been since the day that Hermione had performed the Weeping Spell.

"Mum, I'm right here." Hermione picked up her mother's hand and caressed it with her thumb. With her other hand, she brushed the hair carefully away from Mrs. Granger's temples.

"Tell her to open her eyes," Ginny said, almost absently. Harry turned his eyes to her; she was concentrating on Mr. Granger now, her hands lying flat on chest. "It'll mean more, coming from you."

Hermione nodded. "Open your eyes, Mum," she implored. "Look at me. You've been in a.... an accident. A magical accident. You've been unconscious for a long time and I miss you—please wake up. Please open your eyes."

Everyone was silent. Only Ginny moved, pressing one palm to Mr. Granger's brow as she continued to work. Hermione looked desperately into her mother's unmoving face and continued to stroke her hand and her hair.

"Please, Mum." She leaned down and kissed Mrs. Granger's cheek. "Don't let any more time go by," she whispered fervently. She was barely audible, though the room was entirely quiet. "I finished school. I... studied with a Thinker. I've told you this before, but I don't know if you heard me. Can you hear me?" Hermione paused, waiting. When no response came, she tried again. "Ron's here with me. Do you remember Ron Weasley? I want you to know him. You'll love him. I love him."

Ron blushed and moved his hand a little on Hermione's back, but Hermione, it seemed, was unaware of her surroundings. She continued to speak to her mother.

"Do you remember when I came home after my second year and you almost wouldn't let me go back to Hogwarts?" She laughed a little, though tears choked the sound. "Do you remember when you grounded me after my fourth year? After I let the school nurse shrink my teeth and you found out? You were so angry—but I haven't obeyed that rule you gave me not to mix dentistry and magic. I've done magic on your teeth since you've been unconscious, and you'll be happier for it, I promise you." Hermione drew a deep breath. She didn't seem to be too conscious of what she was saying; she simply continued to speak. "Do you remember when I came home at Christmas in my first year, and I just wanted to show you everything?" Hermione knelt and laid her head next to her mother's on the pillow. She nestled their faces as close as she could get them, and draped her arm protectively over Mrs. Granger's body. "Do you remember when I first got my letter to Hogwarts?" she whispered. "How excited we were? And when I was made prefect? I was made Head Girl, too. I finished school at the top of my class. Mrs. Weasley was there to hug me for it and she's been so wonderful to me, but it isn't the same. Wake up. Wake up."

Harry felt a prickling sensation behind his eyes, and he screwed up his will against it. Ron's tears, however, spilled down his face as he stood behind Hermione's kneeling form, his hands on her hair. His eyes were closed, and so were Hermione's, in stark contrast to Mrs. Granger's, which were wide open. She stared at the ceiling, apparently oblivious to the daughter who was suffering beside her.

Except that her eyes were open.

Harry blinked, unable to register the enormity of what was happening. Mrs. Granger's eyes had been shut only moments ago.

"Yes—" Ginny choked suddenly. "I knew it, I knew it—oh, Hermione—her eyes."

Hermione's head snapped up and she stared at her mother's face, at the brown eyes that had been sealed shut for two months. "Mum?" she whispered, her breath shaking. But Mrs. Granger gave no response at all. In fact, she appeared much as she had during the years she had lain maddened by the Cruciatus Curse, and Harry wondered if perhaps she had regressed into that state once more.

Hermione must have feared the same thing. "Mum?" she demanded, panic in her voice. "Please respond to me. Ginny, how do I know if she can—"

"Mrs. Granger," Ron said quietly, pulling Hermione to her feet so that they could bend over her together, "if you're awake and you can hear us, blink now."

Harry had never heard a room so still. He couldn't look away from Mrs. Granger's face—from her eyes—as her lids slid slowly shut. They stayed closed for a long moment and then, with what seemed to be some effort, they opened again.

Hermione opened her mouth as if to speak, but no speech came. She took several shallow, useless breaths. Her chin trembled. She reached out shaking hands and touched them to her mother's cheeks, still staring down into her eyes, and then she let out a cry of unmistakable, anguished relief. "Mum—" was all she managed before she dropped to her knees again and buried her face in Mrs. Granger's shoulder, where she sobbed like a child, making unintelligible noises of mingled apology and helpless joy.

Clearly incapable of any other response, Mrs. Granger lay entirely still. She could only blink her eyes again, sending tears coursing down her temples. But she was awake. She was cognizant and crying. She knew Hermione again.

The sight of mother and daughter reunited was so powerful that Harry had to look away, both to give his friend her privacy and to fight down his own emotions. He looked at Ginny, whose eyes were trained on Mr. Granger. It was difficult to hear her through Hermione's sobs, but she seemed to be talking to him now, trying to do for him what Hermione had done for her mother. It was not proving to be as successful, and Harry wondered if they would have to wait for Hermione's first wave of shock to subside, so that she would be able to wake up her father as well.

But Ginny seemed to have other ideas. "Ron," she said softly, looking up from Mr. Granger for a moment. "Let Hermione stay where she is. Can you help me?"

Ron looked unwilling to leave Hermione, but he walked around to Mr. Granger's bedside at his sister's request. "What do you need me to do?"

Ginny kept her hands where they were. "Talk to him. Talk about Hermione."

Ron gulped and looked down at Hermione's unconscious father, clearly not convinced that this was the best idea. But he glanced behind him at Hermione, who was too transported by relief to recognize what was happening, and the sight seemed to bolster his courage. "Okay..." he began slowly. "Mr. Granger, your daughter..." He hesitated. When he spoke again, his voice seemed to have dropped an octave—Harry could hardly hear him at all.

"Your daughter misses you," Ron said quietly. "She's been coming here for two and a half years to take care of you. She's done a fantastic job, too—she had to go on a crusade to get you admitted to St. Mungo's, since you're Muggles and all. But she knew this was where you'd get taken care of and you know how she is. Once she gets a mission in her head she turns into a raving lunatic until it ..." Ron trailed off and turned red. "Not that, you know, that's a bad thing. Because I don't think she's mad, I just make fun of her a little—well, not make *fun* of her, exactly—oh, hell, never mind."

Harry marveled that even in a situation such as this, Ron could make him want to laugh out loud. But he didn't. He had never seen his best friend quite so vulnerable as this, and something prevented him from laughing as Ron forced himself to continue.

"So... your daughter." Ron cleared his throat. "Well, she finished school, you know. Top of our class by a mile. Clever... is an understatement. She built the spell that brought down Voldemort. She built the spell that helped heal you. You'd be proud of her, I'm sure. I am. She's an incredible..." Ron faltered and his ears went pink. He shook his head. "I can't do this," he muttered to Ginny. "What am I supposed to say about her to her *dad*?"

"You're doing it, he's so close..." she whispered back. "Just a bit longer."

Ron looked pained, and cast around for something else to say. Finally, he settled on, "I don't know how much you know about Quidditch, but the Chudley Cannons are having their first decent season in a hundred and six years, and if you're going to wake up, sir, I'm telling you, now's the time."

An odd, dry breath escaped Mr. Granger's lips.

Ginny withdrew her hands from her patient's head and heart, and looked down at him in awe. "He's laughing," she breathed to Ron. "I think you've made him laugh. Mr. Granger, if you can hear me, respond to me now."

Hermione's father moved his mouth, just barely. But it was enough.

"He can hear you," Ron said wonderingly, then whirled around to see that Hermione was still on the floor, eyes shut, breathing shallowly against her mother. She looked to have fallen asleep, or perhaps she was simply in shock, and she didn't seem to hear Ron at all. "Hermione—it's your dad. He's awake." Ron made a move as if to help her up, then turned back to Ginny. "Back up a minute," he ordered, raising his wand and backing away himself. Deftly he flew Mr. Granger's bed sideways so that it aligned with his wife's. Only then did Ron step around the bed to lift Hermione up. "Your dad's awake," he repeated, so that she could hear him. And then he reached across Mrs. Granger and settled Hermione in bed, between her parents. "So she can have them both," Ron said, more to himself than anyone else.

Harry watched as Hermione broke down in tears again, this time against her father's shoulder, while she clutched her mother's hand. Ron positioned himself by the bed like a guard, as if he would ward off any evil that might attempt to disrupt the Grangers.

Ginny watched them for a moment, and though her shoulders sagged, her eyes were bright. She dropped her head and rubbed her eyes again, wearily. "They're going to need to be moved to another wing," she said, somewhat incoherently, and certainly to herself. "They'll need their muscles exercised, and I don't know how to do that." Her hand fell to her side and she walked past Harry into the hall, seeming unaware of her surroundings.

Remus stopped her before she could go very far. "Sit down. I'll find the mediwizards who need to be told. You rest." And before Ginny could protest, he had turned and disappeared down the long corridor.

Left standing in the hall, Ginny looked from side to side as if confused as to what she should be doing next. "I need to go home," she said to no one. "I need a Floo port." She swayed slightly, and steadied herself on the wall. "I'm knackered."

Harry thought she might fall to the floor, and he stepped forward quickly to sling an arm under her shoulders before it could happen. Ginny turned her head and stared at him. Her eyes were just inches away.

"Hi, Harry." She gave an exhausted laugh.

Harry looked at her. He wanted to tell her that she had done an incredible thing, but for some reason the words wouldn't come.

Ginny's forehead fell softly forward onto his shoulder; she leaned on him, and suddenly the arm he was using to support her became extremely sensitive. When her breath touched his throat, the hairs stood up on the back of his neck. He pulled her close and held her up.

She spoke without lifting her head. "Help me home," she said, her voice low and muffled. "Please."

Harry supported her to the hospital's Floo portals and steered her into an empty one. "You have to keep your arms by your sides," he reminded her. "And you have to get out at Remus's grate. Can you do that?"

Ginny straightened slightly. "Yes." She was hardly audible.

"Definitely?"

"Yes."

"I'm right behind you," Harry told her, and threw a pinch of Floo powder into the flames. He guided her into the mouth of the fireplace and watched her disappear, anxiety clawing at his heart. He was quick to follow, and when he Apparated into the front room at Lupin Lodge he was both alarmed and relieved to see Ginny lying on the carpet in a heap. At least she had managed to get home. He knelt down and hefted her into his arms—not an easy task, as she was nearly his own weight.

"You don't have to." Her head lolled against his shoulder. "Don't carry me." He picked her up in spite of her protest and made slow progress towards the stairs. One of her hands played idly with his collar as he walked, and her breath came in long, slow pulls. Harry put his foot on the first step and shifted her body, to balance her better. "Thank you," Ginny sighed, into his robes. She let out a strange laugh. "I think I'd cry if I wasn't so tired," she said, and laughed again.

Harry studied her face—she was delirious—and continued to climb the steps, holding her close. He elbowed her bedroom door open, carried her to the bed, and gently put her down. Without pausing to wonder if he ought to do it, he reached for her feet and removed her shoes and socks, then unbuttoned her robes. Though she was wearing very little underneath them, he didn't pause to gape—much. He knew where her nightclothes were, and he got her into them. Ginny was limp and silent, though she did continue to laugh shortly at intervals as Harry dressed her. He did it as quickly and as gently as he could, then pulled her covers up and stroked her hair away from her face, his heart beating hard.

Ginny sighed and leaned into his hand. "Don't leave," she murmured. "Stay with me." Her eyes were closed, but her hands felt for his sleeves, and she tugged weakly at them.

"What..." Harry swallowed. "What about Hermione?"

"She never sleeps here anymore... please, Harry, I miss you."

It was as if they had never fought. Harry kicked off his shoes and crawled into her bed, curling behind her body as if it were the night they had first kissed. He put his arm around her waist to pull her close, took a deep breath and smelled the warmth and sweat of her.

"You woke them up," he muttered into her hair. "You were fantastic—what you gave Hermione is..." He stopped. He couldn't imagine what Hermione must feel upon having her parents restored to her, though he had imagined it a thousand times for himself. There was no way to know what that was like.

Ginny's breath hitched; she rolled towards him and, to his surprise, she awkwardly flung her arms around him and buried her face in his neck. "I wish *you* could have that," she said hotly, and Harry could hear the tears in her voice. "You're the one I want to do that for."

His chest burned, and he had to hold his breath for a moment to keep his emotions in check. "It's all right," he whispered, putting his arms around her and rocking her a little, shutting his eyes. He had lately felt hollow, and he knew it was her absence causing the trouble. He craved a wholeness that only came with having her close. Just like this.

Ginny's sniffing stopped after awhile, and her breath grew soft and shallow. Harry couldn't see her eyes, but he could tell, by the way she had relaxed, that she had fallen asleep. He waited several minutes, and then carefully rolled away from her—she winced, in her sleep. When Harry drew back from her, the line between her eyebrows deepened, as if she had a headache.

It was odd, Harry thought, that she should look ill now that he had let go of her. Usually it was his touch that caused the problem—she was especially sensitive when she was open to emotion, and she must have been very open after the work she had just done. But as he cautiously stood up, taking care not to disturb her sleep, Ginny grew pale and her frown lines became deep.

"It's all right," Harry whispered, and bent over her to stroke her face. To his amazement, as he ran his thumb back and forth across Ginny's cheekbone, the tension seemed to drain from her. Her brow relaxed a little, and she took a deep, sleepy breath that ended in a sigh.

He wasn't hurting her. In fact, he seemed to be having the opposite effect.

A thrill of hope ran through Harry. Needing to test his discovery and make sure that he was right, he immediately bent down and brought his lips to Ginny's forehead, then drew back to see the effects. She breathed out another sigh and her frown disappeared completely.

Harry felt a rush of nearly uncontainable happiness. Relief flooded him. He could hardly stand to let Ginny sleep; he wanted to show her what was possible, wanted her to see that she had done it—he could touch her without causing her any pain, even when she wasn't trying to block him. But he couldn't bear to shake her awake. She looked quiet and peaceful, and he knew she was exhausted.

Harry removed his glasses and put them on her bedside table along with his wand. Carefully, he got into Ginny's bed and curled up beside her. He gingerly laid his arm across her stomach, releasing the tension in his muscles slowly so that all of the weight in his arm wouldn't fall on her at once. She didn't wake up.

A minute later, he was fast asleep.

* * * * *

Ginny lay on her stomach on the rough, dark stones, her legs leaden, her eyes shutting against her will. Tired. She had never been so tired; she knew she had to fight, but there was nothing left. She reached down into the depths of her will, searching for any remaining scrap of strength, and she barely opened her eyes. She would not die. Not here. Not like this, not for him. He couldn't have her—but she was so cold and his voice was so strong, telling her what to think, what to write, making her know she had lost, forcing her fingers across the page to make words that were not her own.

Goodbye, Riddle.

Ginny began to cry. She slumped, and her nose and forehead touched the stones. Her breath wouldn't come—she was choking—panic rose up in her but she was paralyzed against it. She could not thrash or scream; there was no struggle left in her body. Her lungs were his. He'd stopped them, and she would suffocate here, in the darkness of herself, with no one to help her. The wet, gray stones blurred out and her eyelids slid irrevocably shut.

Then blackness—merciless blackness—darker than just shutting her eyes, darker than pitch dark castle rooms, darker than dungeon chambers. Shutting out life. Against it, images flickered like

photographs. The Burrow. Her family. Harry. And all the while Riddle's body rose from her as if it had always been in her, pulling her consciousness away, splitting her apart, stealing her heartbeat for himself... there would be nothing else now... and she would never know if he hurt Harry... not Harry... please not Harry...

"Ginny. Ginny, you have to wake up."

Ginny gasped and jerked. Someone had her by the waist. She struggled, but the arm held fast and she moaned in terror.

"No, it's me, you're all right, it's a nightmare, you're safe—wake up. Come on, Ginny, it's me. It's Harry."

Harry. He was here, just as he'd been the first time. Only now he was wrapped around her, now his voice was just behind her ear, and Ginny rolled toward him without thinking, wanting rescue. She flung her arm over him and clutched him close, pressing her face into his robes and realizing that her cheeks were uncomfortably wet. She'd been crying. Probably talking. Begging for his life—she knew she did that. She had made Hermione repeat it to her once.

Harry very gently rubbed her back. It felt unreal. It couldn't be real. "Are you awake?" he murmured.

She nodded and clung tighter, not sure how old she was, or what was happening. For a long time they didn't speak, and Ginny slowly regained her breath and heartbeat as she catalogued her surroundings. It was very early; and the light in the room was dim and blue, but it was light from outside. This was not the Chamber. Riddle was long gone. His conqueror was right here, protecting her even from the dream of him. Harry was here. Harry was safe. Harry was tracing her back between her shoulder blades with tender fingertips. They were together and the world made sense and...

He must have stayed the night. Ginny couldn't remember how any of it had happened. She remembered Mrs. Granger's eyes opening... she remembered Hermione lying between her parents in their beds, and she remembered... nothing after that.

Ginny withdrew her arm, rolled onto her back, and stared up into Harry's face. He propped himself up and looked down at her. He wasn't wearing his glasses, and there was something small and frightened in his eyes.

"I'm okay," Ginny said. Her voice was croaky with sleep and tears and she wiped at her face. "I just haven't had one that bad in a while."

Harry looked grim, and somewhat disappointed. "Is it because I'm here?" he asked.

"No," Ginny said on reflex, not wanting him to leave her no matter how awful she felt. But slowly... very slowly... she realized that it was not a lie. "No, it's not you, I feel..." She frowned and searched herself. She felt exhausted and open. Very open. And she hadn't been awake long enough to think of separating his energy from hers. Harry's aura flowed into her and around her and she could have evaluated it if she wished to.

And it didn't hurt.

She gazed up at him, amazed. She knew she had to be wrong. Any moment now, the flood of Harry's real emotions would strike her and she would be unable to stay with him like this. She lay there for a long time, as open as she could be, and waited for his presence to make her ill.

"You're not hurting me," she whispered, when she was sure. The air was calm and workable. She wasn't trying to block him—she had simply become strong enough to withstand him. She had never expected it to happen so soon. "You're not hurting me at all."

Harry sighed out as if he'd been holding his breath for a long time. "Really?"

She nodded, and Harry squinted at her a little, obviously trying to make out her reaction. Ginny reached to the bedside cabinet without thinking, and fumbled for his glasses, which she knew would be there. When she found them, she unfolded them in her fingers and carefully fitted them to his face. She tucked them behind his ears, growing very warm when his eyes focused on her with all their green intensity. She pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose with an index finger, the way she had watched him do a million times, and then she dropped her hand to her throat.

He was so beautiful.

Harry gazed at her for a moment, then balanced on one elbow and dragged the pad of his thumb across her cheek, wiping away the last of the wetness beneath her eyes. Ginny lay still and breathed, letting him comfort her. It was hard to believe that it was happening. He opened his mouth—hesitated—

"I have something to tell you," he said abruptly.

Ginny blinked up at him, her heart already beating irregularly. She didn't dare hope. She still wasn't sure how he'd ended up here, or what they'd said, or whether they were fighting. She didn't

think they were. She couldn't remember how she had gone so long without having him close like this, and she never wanted to try it again. "All right."

"I've been wanting to say it." He shifted awkwardly and looked at the pillow, instead of at her face. "It's hard," he said, very faintly. For a while it seemed that he wasn't going to manage anything else, and then he suddenly reached into his pocket and withdrew a crumpled bit of parchment, gripping it in his fingers.

"What's that?" Ginny whispered.

Harry was very red. "A letter I wrote."

"To me?"

He nodded again and his knuckles whitened. Apparently he was in no hurry to hand it over.

"Can I... see it?"

It all happened very fast. Harry shoved the note into Ginny's hand and collapsed onto his stomach, burying his face in her arm and breast. Ginny dropped the parchment onto the bed and stroked his messy hair, sifting it in her fingers. It was rather dirty. She didn't care.

"It's all right," she said quietly.

"Did you *read* it?" His voice was muffled and agonized.

He was so cute.

"Hold on a minute." Ginny took her hand out of his hair, picked up the parchment and worked to unfold it. It took a while, as Harry had her other hand pinned under his body, but she managed to get the letter open and hold it up.

Dear Ginny,

Happy birthday. I got you a present, but it wasn't very good.

You're amazing. I miss you. I'm sorry I shouted at you. Don't give up on me.

I am here.

Love,

Harry

Ginny's eyes filled with tears. "Oh-Harry." The words were choked. She dropped the letter and pulled her other arm from underneath him, to lift his head in both her hands. He looked terrified and lost.

"Was that okay?" he asked. "I know it's short—"

"It's beautiful." Ginny shut her mouth and shook her head. "You wrote that on my birthday?" she said shakily. "Have you been carrying it around?"

"Yeah." Harry shifted up until his cheek was next to hers, and he wrapped his arms around her. She hugged him back, rolling over a bit so that they lay on their sides, holding onto each other for dear life, surrounded by energy that felt like radiant light. Ginny didn't know what to make of the aura, and at first she tried to block it—if it was Harry's then it was not her right to be inside it without permission, no matter how lovely it felt. But she couldn't separate herself from it. It wasn't his at all, she realized in surprise—and it wasn't hers either, but that didn't make sense. Ginny lay still and absorbed it until she understood.

It was *theirs*, this energy. It was what they made... together. It surged and intertwined, warm and cool, deep and endless, enveloping them. Ginny could feel it on her skin, a faint, perfect vibration that was not physical... and yet it was. It was magnetic; it hummed between their bodies, drawing them closer together. It was like... a climate. Their own weather, their own world. Ginny closed her eyes and tightened her arms around Harry, amazed—*this* was what they were to each other. This beautiful, unbearable sense of rightness *belonged* to them. Perhaps it had been there all along, and she had been too foolish to realize it.

"Are we all right now?" he asked, after a long time.

Ginny gave a strange, breathless laugh, and nodded. All right? She was beyond it. She was in love.

Harry rolled onto his back and brought her with him; she rested her forearms on his chest and gazed back down at him. His face was blurry.

"You're crying." He sounded worried.

Ginny lowered her face a fraction and touched her nose to his, reassuring him that the tears were only good. She didn't have a voice to tell him with. And then she had nothing at all—she had left the world—because Harry had lifted his chin and he was kissing her with such gentleness that she wasn't sure she could endure it; it was like coming up for air. For sunlight. His lips opened hers—her heart was breaking—his mouth was so familiar and so necessary that Ginny suddenly felt

afraid. What had she been thinking, pulling away from him? She needed him. They belonged to each other. She wasn't sure what had made her doubt it.

"I can't lose you," she mumbled suddenly, breaking away. "I was lying when I said it was all right if you don't love me—it's not all right." She opened her eyes and looked into his—they were right there. And so green. So quiet and waiting. "I don't want to fight with you ever again," she whispered. "I've been so stupid. We've had enough problems. We should know... we should *know* we have each other, no matter what else is wrong in the world."

Harry lay motionless beneath her and held her gaze.

"And you do have me," she said, as a sob rose up in her chest. "I hope I didn't make you doubt it—you've always had me—always." She wanted to look away. It was hard to continue when his eyes went fierce like that. "I'll never give up on you, all right?" she finally managed. "I'm not going anywhere. Don't give up on *me*."

Harry had stayed completely still throughout her speech. But with her last words, and without warning, his chest hitched, and he pulled her down on top of him to hold her close, his face in her neck, the lenses of his glasses pressing her skin. And then he mumbled something almost incoherent that pierced her body and stopped her heart.

"I've—I've never said that before." He was shaking like mad.

Ginny couldn't imagine it. Never once...? In all the times she had thought about Harry, it hadn't occurred to her that he never would have *said* it... But of course he hadn't said it, of course there had been no person—perhaps Ron or Hermione, but he never would have *said* it.

He had given it to *her*.

"I love *you*," she whispered back, unable to think coherently. How brutal and empty his life had been—not in all ways, but in some of the fundamentals—and that deprivation had touched him more profoundly than even she had ever considered. But it would never be like that again. Never. She would see to that. She raised her head and leaned her forehead to his, determined to make him know it. "I love you so much, Harry."

She didn't know how many times she said it after that—enough times that it should have lost its meaning—but he seemed to need to hear it. Every time the words escaped her she felt his energy shiver. Ecstatic. So she said it to his neck and his shoulder and his temple; she said it into his hair and into his ear, and she said it to his beautiful eyes, lifting his glasses to kiss his eyelids with all the wonder she'd felt forever. She wanted to fill him with it, to make him believe it in every pore and every thought so that he wouldn't have to wonder. Love. It was all she could concentrate on. It burst out of her like light and it was all his, and it always had been, but she had been afraid of it. It was so total. It took up so much of her. She would never hold it back again.

She wasn't sure how long it took for Harry to open his eyes and gaze up at her. As soon as he did, he rolled her onto her back, and Ginny lay pressed beneath him, trying to wrap one of her legs around his to pull him closer as he bent and brushed his lips across hers, making her whole body jump.

It was a moment before she realized that she couldn't use her legs at all—they were confined. She was wearing a nightdress that had got rather tangled up, what with all the rolling.

She couldn't remember putting it on.

"Harry?" she breathed against his mouth.

"Mm." He brushed another soft kiss along her top lip and Ginny nearly forgot her question.

"Did you put me in this nightdress?"

Harry went still. His mouth moved away and his very hot cheek slid alongside hers.

"Did you change my clothes?" she asked again, when he stayed silent.

"Are you angry?" he asked. His voice was very low.

Ginny shivered all over. He'd *changed* her—he'd seen her naked—or almost naked. She shifted a little, trying to feel if he had all of her underclothes in place. When she realized that he had, she smiled against his neck. He was so shy. So decent. And she was glad of it—she wouldn't have wanted to be unconscious for *that*, but... still. How very Harry.

"No, I'm not angry," she said, feeling a bit bashful. She kissed the spot just below his ear. "It was... really sweet of you."

"I—" his voice was dry. "I thought you'd be more comfortable if—"

"I am," she assured him. "I am." She rubbed the back of his neck; he was tense and embarrassed. She moved her fingers down between his shoulder blades and rubbed the muscles there, deepening her touch to find the spots where he ached the most. Harry let out a long, slow breath, and she began to use her other hand as well, feeling out the tension in his back and trying to ease it. He made a muffled sound of pleasure.

"Is that good?" Ginny asked quietly.

"I missed you so much," he blurted, and held her tighter.

She kept working. She loved him, and he wanted this, and she could do it now. The dragons had taken such a toll on him—he needed so much care and attention—and it wasn't just for him. Every fraction of the tension she released from Harry's body relieved her just as much.

"Do you have to work today?"

He nodded, and Ginny felt a pang of helpless anger.

"No. I wish you'd take a break."

Harry slumped closer to her with every movement of her hands. "I wish I could. I will soon—they're training more riders, and Charlie says it'll only be a week or two before we can start using them."

"And you'll really let someone take over your shift?"

"For a little while." Harry breathed out again, long and slow. "That feels so good," he mumbled, and his face went hot again, against her neck. "I have to give up riding for a little while. I can't keep up anymore, I can't even see all the Dementors that escape."

Ginny tried to block the thought that nagged her.

"It was so much easier before they all went mad and started trying to get out—I wouldn't complain if they'd just go back to how they used to be before..." He shook his head against her. "Never mind, I don't know. There's no way. There's no way to control them."

Ginny had a feeling she knew someone who *could* control them. But she was sworn to secrecy. Then again, Harry needed rest. He needed *this*. And all the dragon riders deserved relief. She just wasn't sure if there was any way to approach Malfoy that would make a difference—or if it was right to approach him at all.

"Harry?" She was surprised by how timid she sounded.

"What's wrong?"

She blinked. He knew her better than she realized. "It's just I don't know how to... I can't really *say* anything... But I think..." She stopped moving her hands, and she knew he was listening. "If I knew something—if I thought I knew something, and a... prisoner in Culparrat might have some information but I'd... signed a contract..."

Harry lifted his head. He stared down at her. "I won't ask," he said seriously. "But if you're saying that Malfoy—" Harry stopped. He rolled off her and sat up, and Ginny sat up beside him.

"I don't know anything," she said honestly. "But I think he might. Do you think I could get in to see him?"

Harry glanced at her. "Do you really think he'd tell you anything?"

"I don't know." Ginny met his eyes. "But I know I had an effect on him, whether he liked it or not, so I've got a better chance than anyone else."

"Then you have to try." Harry shook his head and smacked a fist on the mattress. "Ron was right all along," he muttered. "But how were we supposed to know? It still doesn't make sense, I still don't see how..."

Ginny bit her tongue, though it was very difficult. "You don't think I could strike a bargain with him, do you?" she asked. "Because if I can't at least promise Malfoy a shorter sentence, then I can't imagine he'd be willing to... but no, I know how strict Sirius has been about all that."

Harry laughed shortly. "If Malfoy's information has to do with the Dementors, Sirius won't stand by any rules."

"Yes. Well." Ginny took a deep breath and let it out. "Ron won't want to give Malfoy a reprieve. Not for any reason."

"No. Ron won't. And it's Ron who's in charge at the moment."

They looked at each other, and Ginny clasped her hands in her lap. "Harry... no matter what a relief it would be to put things back to normal, do you think we *should* offer Malfoy any sort of bargain?"

Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose and hunched over to lean his forearms on his legs and stare at his feet. For a long time, he seemed to be deep in thought and then—"I don't know," he said. "I..." He laughed a little. "I'm sitting here trying to think of what Dumbledore would say."

"I do that sometimes."

He glanced at her. "Well... he'd probably just say to do what's right, and then he'd sit back and let us work it out."

"You sound like him already."

Harry blushed. "He'd say... to try to see things clearly. To take it all into consideration."

"For the greater good."

"Right." Harry frowned. "So, if Malfoy *could* contain the Dementors, or calm them down, then..."

"People on shore wouldn't be in as much danger."

"The dragon budget could get cut in half, and the Ministry could use it for other things."

"The dragon riders could have a rest."

Harry gave her a look. "That's not important."

"Oh yes it is."

"One less thing for the Healer to deal with, then," he countered.

Ginny smiled. "All right—and the Minister, too. And the guards assigned to the shoreline could concentrate on something else."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "All that for one bargain."

"Well... but we haven't weighed the consequences."

Harry frowned in thought, and Ginny watched him, already feeling relieved. He knew just how to think about this with her—he understood the essence of things without needing explanations.

"Malfoy could cause a lot of damage if he was free in the world," Harry said finally, blowing out a breath. "A *lot*."

Ginny sighed. "I know. It's never going to stay peaceful forever—" She touched Harry's hand when he winced. "Well... it's *not*," she said quietly. "Years ago there was Grindelwald, and then Voldemort came to power twice, and before all that there was—"

"I know." Harry's eyes were dark and resolute. "I just... hope it's a long time."

"So do I."

They looked at each other for a moment that seemed to stretch forever, and in it Ginny felt the war and all that it had meant. The idea of fighting another one made her feel so weary that she shifted closer to Harry, let her head fall against his shoulder, and closed her eyes. A moment later she felt her hair pushed aside, and his hand was on the back of her neck, his fingers opening and closing on her skin.

"Malfoy could easily help another Dark wizard rise to power," Harry said quietly. "And he'd do it."

"Yes, he'd have all that money," Ginny agreed, though half her mind was concentrating on the way Harry was touching her. "He could use it to blackmail people. He could support any horrible thing he wanted—he could turn out just like his father."

"He will." Harry's fingers stopped for a moment. "He practically has, just look at him." He made a noise of disgust. "The whole time he was at Azkaban it was like he didn't feel a thing—how can you feel *nothing* around those Dementors? How can you be human if you don't feel them?"

Ginny swallowed the protest that rose in her. What she knew of Malfoy's emotions was privileged information.

Harry went on. "And his money's not the only worry—the Ministry would be acting inconsistently if they let him out. It wouldn't look good for your dad—or for Sirius and Ron."

"That's true," Ginny said. "Not just that, but all the other prisoners would want to work out bargains too, and there would be a lot of trouble—there might have to be new trials."

Harry's fingers began to move again. "Well...but not if it were all kept quiet."

Ginny half-smiled and settled closer to him. "Funny, you didn't sound quite as much like Dumbledore just then."

"No, he kept things quiet." Harry's hand slid down to rest on her back, and Ginny raised her head to look at him; he had tilted up his face and was studying the ceiling, as if searching for Dumbledore there. "Believe me, he kept loads of stuff to himself."

They were silent together for a little while as the light turned from blue to gold around them. The sun was rising. Harry suddenly gasped, checked his watch and jumped up. "I'm late." He grabbed his wand from the bedside cabinet. "We'll talk more about this—tonight?"

Ginny looked up at him from her seat in the middle of the bed. "I'll try to be awake."

Harry paused before Disapparating. He lowered his wand and looked at her. "No," he said. "You get some sleep."

"Well, but I want to go and check on the Grangers anyway—"

"No," Harry repeated, more firmly. "You get some *sleep*. You can check on them tomorrow, and I'll talk to you tomorrow night, instead."

"But Harry—"

"No." He reached out and smoothed back some of Ginny's hair, sending a ribbon of lovely sensation into her head and straight down through her. She closed her eyes and sighed. She *was*

tired. And his fingers were so gentle on her forehead... skimming across her temple...

"I love you." The words slipped out of her for the thousandth time as Harry brushed back the rest of her hair.

"Go on, get some rest," he said quietly. "Lie down."

Ginny didn't protest. Exhaustion and Harry were far too persuasive; she curled up on her side and heard him close the window shades. The room went dark.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he whispered. Ginny felt the soft weight of blankets on her body. She felt his hands tuck the covers around her, and then his mouth touched her cheek as the world began to ebb away.

"Be careful, please," she mumbled. "Be safe."

There was an almost inaudible sigh, followed by a soft *pop!* and a pang of loss... He was gone. She was in her bed alone without him. Sleep descended around her, heavy and black, and Ginny tensed, expecting nightmares.

But the nightmares didn't come. Instead of a dungeon chamber, there was a wide, moonlit sky and the crash of the sea at her feet, and Harry was on a dragon above her, soaring through her head-silhouetted against the moon on a dark spread of wings. Ginny lay back on the sand and watched him fly, and she knew with strange, comforting certainty that as long as he was nearby, no darkness could touch her.

She stretched out in the sand, feeling very safe, and she fell asleep again within her dream, lulled by the circles Harry made in the sky and endless thrum of the sea.

* * * * *

Awake.

It was the most beautiful word in the English language. Better than alive, because it implied both life and awareness, and one was nothing without the other. Awake. *Awake.*

Hermione stepped out of a long, hot shower and wrapped up in Ron's bathrobe. She liked the feeling of it on her skin, and the way it engulfed her and made her feel warm all over. His touch, by proxy. He was so good. He had been there through all of it, and he had stood guard last night, and he had held her hand all morning, through the interviews and assessments run by the mediwizards at St. Mungo's.

"*It's a miracle,*" they'd said. "*Unprecedented. Impossible.*"

Hermione looked into her face in the mirror. She was small, and her hair would be frizzy again when it dried, and her Cortona color had long faded. But her eyes were fiercely bright. And she felt such incredible peace. She would write a long letter to Delia, today. A really good one, with no self-effacing in it.

"Hermione?" Ron knocked softly on the door. "Can I come in?"

"Yes."

He did, and he stepped up behind her and wrapped his arms around her. It was much better to be engulfed by him than by just his bathrobe, and Hermione relaxed against his chest. Ron rested his chin on her damp hair. "Tired?"

"No." She smiled a little at his reflection. She hadn't slept so well in a long, long time. "Are you?"

He searched her eyes in the mirror. "No," he said finally.

"Yes you are, you were up all night." She rubbed her thumbs over his hands. "You don't have to come back with me tonight, I'll be fine."

"I want to come." He kissed her head. "I have to get them... used to me. It must be a shock, you know, you're all grown up and there *I* am... I don't know." Ron's ears were pink. "I don't want your dad thinking I'm just some idiot."

Hermione reached over her head and took Ron's face in her hands. They made such a funny picture, in the mirror. "You made him laugh," she said quietly. "He's going to love you."

Her father would actually *know* Ron. And so would her mother. Not as a boy, but as the man she loved. Hermione was suddenly struck by such painful happiness that she turned and kissed Ron with all her heart, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Get dressed," he said hoarsely, after a little while. "I have something for you, and we have to go and get it."

Hermione studied his face, intrigued. She had sort of expected him to push the bathrobe to the floor and carry her to his room. "Go where?"

"Just get some clothes on."

"I want to go back to hospital—"

"They said you could go back at six, it's only two. I'll have you back with time to spare."

Hermione agreed. She dressed quickly; it was still rather amusing to her that so many of her things had migrated to Ron's room and that she had half a wardrobe to choose from here. She pulled on her jeans.

"Here—" Ron tossed her a shirt. It was oversized and orange and long-sleeved, with a big black double C emblazoned across the front.

"You're taking me to a Quidditch match?" she asked, a bit dubiously.

"No, but all your stuff's in the laundry basket, and that's clean."

That was fair enough. Hermione pulled the shirt over her head and rolled the sleeves to a manageable length.

"Ready?" Ron asked and, when she nodded, he handed her a tiny slip of folded paper. "Meet me on the lawn at this address," he said, and touched her face. "Trust me."

He Disapparated.

Hermione unfolded the paper with curious fingers. *42 Old Crown Road, Gillingham.*

Her hands trembled. Why... why did he want her to go to her house? He knew that she had only been there once since... And now that her parents were awake, now that she could try to forget all of it, she never wanted to see that place again. She wanted it gone—she should have sold it. She knew she should have sold it.

Trust me.

She did. But he was asking her to do something quite difficult and painful on a day that should have been pure joy, and she didn't understand his motives. If it had been anyone but Ron, Hermione would not have gone. But she Apparated into the driveway of her old house and gazed at the front steps where Ron already sat, looking strangely at home.

There were so many flowers in bloom. And the grass had all grown back, lush and shining green. It really had been a long time since she had been here... she didn't even remember all the trees that lined the yard, and she wondered if her memory was playing tricks on her. All in all, the house was more beautiful now than it had ever been—at least from the outside—the paint hadn't so much as chipped; it was perfect blue, and the white shutters gleamed.

Ron watched her walk up the drive, then stood and touched his wand to the door, making it swing open.

"Ron..." Hermione stood at the bottom of the steps and shook her head. "Please. Not today."

He looked down at her, and all the comfort in the world was in his blue eyes. "Haven't you ever thought about where your parents would go, when they woke up?"

Hermione winced. She couldn't let them come back here. They had loved this house—her father had done the interior woodwork himself, and her mother had taken such care with the gardens and the carpets and everything else. Hermione had loved this house too; she'd grown up here. Here she had discovered that she was different from other children, long before she had ever known that she was a witch. Here she had been loved and taught and nurtured. But the bad memories would make it very difficult to live here, in spite of all the good ones.

"I haven't thought about it much," she admitted. "I just concentrated on getting them awake. I... don't want to see in there."

Ron reached his hand out. "Come on," he said. "I promise it's all right."

She put her faith in Ron, and her hand in his, and let him lead her into her childhood home, steering herself for ugly burns and rotten stench and the horrible, lingering shadows of Death Eaters.

But it smelled... clean. Last time she'd been here, it had smelled like burnt plastic and smoke, and something evil. But that was gone, and the house was silent and cool—almost sweet—as they walked through it. There wasn't even any dust. The curtains had been drawn and everything was beautifully organized—even her mother's china cabinet sparkled as if it had just been cleaned.

The china cabinet that had been smashed through.

Hermione stopped walking and stared at it. She had a sudden, dim suspicion. "Ron..."

"Shh." He pulled her towards the library and Hermione resisted a little, but followed behind him. She braced herself to see the worst of it. Here it had happened, here there had been wreckage and burns, shelves destroyed, books in torn disarray, fingernail marks in the arms of her mother's chair... She peered in, her heart throbbing painfully. It was a horror room, it was a nightmare place.

It had been rebuilt.

Hermione stared for a moment at the bright, peaceful tidiness of the room where she had first become a reader. This... this was what it was *supposed* to look like. She walked in without Ron, her hands over her mouth. There was not one scar, not one trace, of the thing that had happened

here. Her father's shelves were straight and polished. The wood of her mother's chair was smooth and unmarred. The books were in lovely rows, the carpet was no longer scorched, the whole place was right.

"Oh... oh, Ron..."

"Go and see your room."

Her heart beating like a bird's, Hermione raced out of the wonderful library where she had learned to think, and hurtled up the steps to the little room where she had learned to dream.

"My letter," she managed in a tiny, shaky voice. Her Hogwarts letter. They had burnt *Mudblood* across it.

It had been restored.

And everything else was in its place, just as she had left it when she had gone away to Hogwarts for her sixth year, before everything had gone so horribly, desperately wrong. It was normal. It was hers. It was serene and uninvaded. Hermione walked around in a daze, touching things and gazing out the window, and trying to contain the unbearable love that was swelling in her heart.

She turned to find Ron watching her from the doorway, tears standing in his eyes.

"You did this," she managed.

He nodded faintly.

"You... Ron. You paid for this."

He glanced down. Nodded again.

"The trees outside and the china and the shelves and—my mother's—my letter—Ron—" Hermione couldn't stand up under the kind of love she felt. She found herself sitting in the middle of her carpet, reaching up her arms, and Ron came to her at once.

He knelt and pulled her into a powerful hug. "It's all right?" he finally said, his voice scratchy. "I just thought if it were normal then they wouldn't mind living here."

"But when did you start?" she whispered, holding him tight. "How long ago?"

"With my first paycheck."

Hermione's throat clenched. She pulled back and stared up at him. "But you had no way of knowing they'd wake up."

His eyes were still swimming. He sat back cross-legged, so that their knees touched, and he pushed her hair behind her ears. "I thought there was a good enough chance," he said, and took her chin in one hand. He lifted it and looked at her. "You... I can't remember when you've put your mind to something and not managed it."

So much faith. Hermione crawled into his lap, twined her arms around him and buried her face in his shoulder. Ron kept playing with her hair. And they were in her room, where she had never, never expected to feel at home again—but *he* had made it safe and whole and clean. Like only he could.

"Thank you," she mumbled. It wasn't enough. But for once she was at a loss for words; she couldn't begin to say the things he deserved to hear, and she imagined he knew it all anyway.

He rocked her just as he always had when she had needed comfort after visits to St. Mungo's—but this time it was all happiness. So much happiness that it hurt.

"Ginny thinks my dad is permanently blind," she said, after a long time, "so until my mum's completely recovered, they'll need me here." She sat back and let go of Ron's neck, to look him in the face. "When they're rehabilitated enough to leave hospital, I'll want to live with them and help them. Until they can look after themselves."

Ron was quiet, and then he nodded. "Well, I thought you might want to do that, so I had my dad put this house on the Floo network." He shrugged. "And at least we can Apparate, right?"

Hermione stared at him. He was... he'd thought of everything. She smoothed his hair away from his face, and dragged her fingertips down his cheeks. "You're a wonderful man," she said softly, and loved how fully it made him blush. "Do you have any idea how much I love you, Ron Weasley?"

He glanced rather skittishly at her, and took an unsteady breath. "I love you too," he said, but his voice was jumpy. "I... want to..." He took another deep breath, looking suddenly pale and ill.

Hermione peered at him. "Are you all right?"

At once, he went bright pink again. "Look," he said, but then he pressed his mouth shut and shook his head.

"What?"

"Hermione..." He licked his lips.

"What?"

"Well, *give* me a minute!" He blew out a breath, sat totally still for several seconds, then suddenly

plunged a hand into his pocket and came up gripping something small and black.

It was a very little box.

Hermione's stomach clenched. She felt her mouth go dry.

"You drive me insane," Ron said, and his voice cracked. "You have for... ever. And I know I'm not perfect."

She couldn't breathe. She couldn't even look at him. Her eyes were on the box, and she was terrified.

Exhilarated.

"But I'm useless without you, there's no point in—" Ron shook his head and displaced her from his lap with sudden ferocity.

Hermione sat startled on the floor as Ron got onto his knees to stare down into her face. She met his eyes—barely—afraid she was going to burst. Was this—was he really—here and now? Without warning?

Yes.

"I want to be the one who looks after you," he said heatedly. "And I want you to look after me. There's no one else, Hermione, you're it, you always were. I want you for good."

He pushed the box into her shaking hands, and his were shaking too.

"Not soon, it doesn't have to be now—I know we're too young and you've got your parents and perhaps you're not finished at Cortona—I don't know. But I don't care."

He helped her to open the box; he yanked the ring out of the cushion—they fumbled uselessly together, both of them too unstrung to manage it, and then the silvery circle was on her ring finger and Ron had gripped her hands and pulled her onto her knees to face him.

"Just promise me that someday... say that when we're old enough and when you're ready—Hermione—"

Her eyes were locked to his. She waited, listening, still too shocked to be sure.

"Marry me," he rasped.

She tried to work her mouth—she nodded—she pulled her hands out of his and held his face in trembling fingers—

"Yes. Yes—"

Ron sealed his mouth over Hermione's with a muffled cry of happiness and she pressed her hands to his face, feeling the ring between her finger and his skin. The promise that had always been there, the thing she'd always known, was spoken now. Forever now. This was a man who cared so much about her that he would restore her parents' home—this was a man who had never hesitated to stand up and fight for what he believed in—this was a man who loved his family and his friends—and this man would be her husband. Hermione knew it made no sense to cry.

"I don't—deserve you—"

He kissed her hungrily. "You've got that backwards," he muttered, and hugged her so hard that she gasped and threw her arms around him in reply.

Over his shoulder she saw the flash of her ring, and she held it up behind his back to stare uncomprehendingly at it as he kissed her neck. An engagement ring. She was... his fiancée. How strange. Hermione gazed at the delicate band and the two little diamonds—though they weren't *that* small; however had he managed... or were they diamonds? She brought her hand closer and squinted at them, surprised to see that they were really a figure eight of glass, built right into the band. An infinity symbol? But that wasn't it either...

"Ron!" she exclaimed, when she realized what it was. "Where did you find this?"

He pulled back and looked dazedly at her. "Huh?" He ran a thumb along her cheekbone.

Hermione held her hand flat between them, palm down, and stared at her ring, enchanted. Set into the silver band was a tiny, working hourglass, full of sparkling white sand. She tilted her hand from side to side and watched time slide back and forth.

"You like it?"

She looked up at him. She wasn't sure what to say; she never would have expected Ron to get something like this so very right.

"There were nicer ones," he said, and his ears were red again. "With diamonds and stuff. I could've—if you'd rather, we can go back, but this seemed more like you."

"I've never seen anything so pretty," Hermione managed. "It's perfect."

Ron looked profoundly relieved. "Oh." He sighed. "Good."

"It reminds me of my Time Turner," she said, still fascinated by the movement of the sand. She held up her hand and they both watched it flash.

"Yeah." Ron nodded. "Exactly. So every time you look at it, you can remember that you're insane, and I know it."

"Ron."

He shushed her and grabbed her waist. Swept his eyes over her and got a funny smirk on his face. "And... whenever you think about how you got engaged—for the entire rest of your life—" He kissed her quickly, grinning, and Hermione felt a stab of apprehension.

"What?" she demanded.

"Remember you were in a Cannons shirt."

"RON!"

He laughed like a maniac. "You fell for it, too—your clean clothes were right in the top drawer—"

"You put me in this on *purpose* to *propose* to me?" Hermione wasn't sure whether to laugh, hit him or kiss him. She knew she was going to spend the rest of her life torn between those options.

"Hell yes." Ron grabbed handfuls of the huge orange shirt, and pulled it tight around her back, flattening it to her body. "It was this or the white thing," he said, and leaned in to brush his nose against hers. "And the white thing would've made you get all suspicious."

"Aren't you clever," she huffed.

"I'm a genius." He laughed against her mouth and kissed her—but the kiss quickly shifted from playful to real, and Hermione didn't have long to worry about what she was wearing, because it was on the floor and she was in her childhood bed with Ron, who loved her and knew her.

And wanted to marry her.

A/N: Thanks to Arabella's sister, who suggested Ron's secret over a year ago.

We owe our first-born children to the beta readers: Cap'n Kathy, Caroline, CoKerry, Firelocks and Moey

— CHAPTER FORTY-ONE —

The Ring

It wasn't until the next night that Ginny had an opportunity to talk to Ron. She needed more sleep, there were classes to catch up on, and Ron and Hermione were glued to the Grangers' bedsides. And so Ginny waited. She spoke with Remus, who listened and then gave her permission to visit Culparrat. It was a relief to have his support, but Ginny still had a knot in her stomach as she left Lupin Lodge and walked slowly down the road towards the Notch. Remus's permission was not going to be the most difficult to obtain. Not this time.

The Notch was bright and cheerful in the twilight, but as Ginny approached she heard passionate, angry shouts drifting towards the road from within. Ron and Harry sounded irate about something—she felt a thud in her stomach. She hoped it wasn't anything serious. She ran the rest of the way up to their house, hurried up the stairs and let herself in without knocking.

"WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?" Ron was howling. "THAT'S NOT A FOUL, THAT'S PERFECTLY LEGAL, HE CAN BE *BEHIND* THE HOOP, HE JUST CAN'T *BLOCK THE QUAFFLE* FROM BACK THERE—IF HIS FOOT WAS IN *FRONT* OF THE HOOP, AND *THAT'S* WHAT BLOCKED THE QUAFFLE, THEN THAT'S ALLOWED!"

Ginny stopped running. Relieved that it was only Quidditch, she walked to the front room in time to see Ron collapse onto the floor, pounding his fists on either side of him, as Harry turned up the volume. The sight of Harry stopped her in the doorway, and she gazed at the back of him, her eyes lingering on his unkempt black hair and traveling down the lean breadth of his shoulders and back, taking in the fact that he was still damp from his shower. She wanted to walk up behind him and breathe him in. Kiss his neck.

"YOU'D THINK AN OFFICIAL BLOODY REF WOULD KNOW THE RULES! I CAN'T BELIEVE—THIS IS *BOLLOCKS* —" Ron's tirade disintegrated into nothing but swear words, and Ginny snapped out of her reverie. There wouldn't be any kissing just at present. She wasn't here to talk to Harry. Not first, anyway.

"Shut up a minute," Harry said, just loudly enough to be heard over the racket that Ron was making. "I want to hear what they're—"

"And Oliver Wood has called a time out. He's having a heated discussion with the referee—he's pulling a play book out of the referee's pocket and opening it—he's pointing to a page and shouting something—"

"GOOD!" Ron bellowed from the floor. "GIVE IT TO HIM, OLIVER!"

"Shush!" said Harry.

"And the referee is sending him off the pitch! And the referee is sprinting down the pitch—Oliver Wood is making a run for him—that's right, Oliver, swing at him! Damn it, he missed! And The Cannons' Beaters have made an emergency landing—they're pulling Wood back before he can make a woman out of that useless excuse for a ref—NO! Wood has been suspended from the game! The Cannons are already two goals behind and it seems they'll be playing without a Keeper for the duration of the match!"

Ron wailed miserably.

"It might be all right," said Harry stoutly. "If Knight gets the Snitch before another thirteen goals are made, then it won't mean a thing."

"What if Knight..." Ron began, but then he snorted and sat up. "Never mind," he said. "That's sort of like saying *you* wouldn't get it, isn't it? She'll get it all right. It had just better come out in time." Looking far more cheerful, Ron pushed himself to his feet and, for the first time, caught sight of Ginny. He looked startled. "Hi," he said, and glanced at Harry. "Er—haven't seen you over here in awhile." He seemed to remember something. "Hey, thanks for *knocking*, by the way, what if... well." He looked a bit pink. "You should knock."

"Yeah," Harry said, turning and catching her eyes for the first time. He looked drained and gray and horribly exhausted, but he shot her a tiny grin, and Ginny felt a wonderful glow all over, along with a rush of anxiety. She wanted to go to him—she needed to help him feel better—and she could do it now. Of course, she *had* promised Remus not to work on anyone, but perhaps for *Harry*...

"You should definitely knock," Harry went on. "You wouldn't want to see what I saw last night—"

"Potter," Ron growled.

"Oh, it's all right, I'm already scarred for life." Ginny smiled. "I walked in on Mum and Dad when I was seven."

Both Ron and Harry went silent and looked horrified, and Ginny took advantage of the pause.

"Ron, I need to talk to you in private."

Harry's expression shifted at once. He met her eyes over Ron's shoulder and gave her a bracing nod. Ginny licked her lips and squared her shoulders. She could do this. Ron had to say yes.

"I'm listening to the *match*," Ron complained. "It's the quarter *final*."

"It's about Malfoy's case," Ginny added. "About getting information on him?"

Ron's whole demeanor immediately changed; he didn't waste another moment. "Right." He pointed to the wireless. "Fill me in on what happened when I get back?" he asked Harry, and didn't wait for an answer before striding toward the front door. "Let's go for a walk," he said, and beckoned to Ginny.

She followed Ron outside. It was comfortably cool and had grown nearly dark. Someone was setting off fireworks down in the village; they erupted in the air and filled the distant sky with bursts of color.

"So," Ron rubbed his hands together as they began to walk towards the fireworks. "You and Harry are doing better?"

It wasn't the first question Ginny had expected, and she was thrown. "Er—yes. We... made up." It was a massive understatement.

"That's great." Ron slung an arm around her, squeezed, and let her go. In his aura, Ginny could sense something enormous—something unbearably happy. Something so ecstatic that she felt it before she could stop herself.

"Wow," she murmured. "Ron, what's up with *you*?"

He glanced at her, shrugged, and then grinned so brilliantly that his eyes crinkled up and nearly disappeared. "Oh, nothing," he said, and took a big breath that ended in a lovesick sort of sigh. "Just, you know. Having a good week."

"Did you win a million Galleons or something?"

He laughed. "Better," he said, but then he shook his head. "I can't say anything yet," he told her. "You can't ask or I'll want to tell, and I'm not allowed."

"When can I know?"

"When... Hermione's parents are able to communicate a bit better." Ron slung his arm around Ginny again and left it there as they continued walking. "You're a star, you know that?" He kissed the top of her head. "Waking them up. You're just..." He sighed. "Thank you. I don't know how to thank you. No one does, so you're just going to have to be satisfied that we're all in awe of you, all right?"

Ginny snickered.

"I'm serious! Now no more questions."

Ginny had just opened her mouth to ask for more clues, but she closed it. She wouldn't press him. She would show him how *he* should have behaved when she had told him that *she* had a secret.

"So tell me what you were saying about Malfoy," Ron said, letting go of her again.

Ginny gave him a sidelong, irritated look. But Ron seemed perfectly unaware that he was being hypocritical, and she sighed. There was no point in expecting him to consider Draco Malfoy rationally.

"I want to go to Culparrat and talk to him," Ginny said. "In private."

Ron glanced at her. "He's Stunned," he said, rather curtly. "And I thought you promised Remus you wouldn't do any more private Healing sessions."

"It's not to do Healing. And Remus knows," Ginny said. "And Malfoy... well, you know that there are things I can't tell you."

Ron snorted.

"I *can't*, Ron. It's not that I don't want to."

"Then you do know things."

"I... to be perfectly honest, I don't. I just have a vague idea." She gave Ron a pleading look. "But if you'll let me talk to Malfoy, perhaps I can convince him to *let* me tell you."

"Oh, you're going to get friendly information out of Malfoy?" Ron gave a mirthless laugh. "Yeah, I'm sure he'll cooperate."

"I know he won't. That's why I..." Ginny drew a deep breath. She knew that Ron was going to flatly deny her what she needed, but she had to ask. "I have to be able to bargain with him, Ron. I have to be able to... to tell him his sentence will be shortened, or that he can go free if he'll—"

Ron was already gaping at her in horror. "Are you *mad*?" he breathed. "Malfoy's never getting out of that place if I can help it—how could you *want* him to? You know what he's capable of—"

"It's not that I want him free, it's that I want him to do whatever he can to..." *Stop the Dementors.* But Ginny couldn't finish. It would have given information away. "Look. Just let me speak to him. I won't promise him anything. But give me a chance to talk to him, and let me see what I can do without making an offer like that."

Ron shook his head. "I don't want you dealing with him. He's completely belligerent."

"Oh, like I care."

"No, there has to be a loophole." Ron frowned. "Here—let me ask you a few other questions. And you'll have to answer these on the stand, eventually, so you might as well start preparing with me now."

Ginny blinked. "On the stand?" she said. "Why?"

"We'll call you as a witness. We have to make sure that the evidence we recovered from Malfoy Manor can't be suppressed in the hearing, and Malfoy's going to try and have it all thrown out."

"On what basis?" Ginny demanded.

"On the basis that you breached your contract, and that's how we knew where the trapdoor was, and where to look for the stuff. And that's going to be difficult to disprove."

Ginny rubbed her head. It was so much to think about. "How *did* you know where that trapdoor was, anyway?" she asked.

Ron shrugged. "I heard it somewhere—look. Answer me this. You signed a contract?"

"Yes."

"Who wrote it up?"

"Their family's Defender."

"What exactly did it say?"

"That I would go to Malfoy Manor and be paid to do work with Malfoy, and that I would reveal no part of what transpired between myself and Malfoy during the Healing session to any person."

Ron let out a breath. "And how much did he pay you?"

Ginny frowned. "Why is that important?"

"How much?" Ron repeated.

"Well, he..." Ginny raised her eyebrows. "He didn't pay me, actually. He tried, but I didn't take the money."

Ron stopped walking. "You didn't *take* the money?" he said urgently. "Nothing?"

Ginny stopped beside him. "Not a Knut," she declared, glad to be able to say it. Whatever bad decisions she had made, she had not taken any of the Malfoy money.

"Ginny..." Ron turned and grabbed her by the shoulders, grinning as if he'd just won a chess match. "You know what this means? Your contract with him is *null and void*. It's meaningless. You don't have to honor it."

Ginny felt a heavy, sinking feeling in her stomach. "I—I don't?" she repeated anxiously.

"No! This is *great*! They won't be able to throw out a single *piece* of that evidence—and now you can tell me anything you want—so go on, what is it, what was he doing up there at Azkaban? What's your theory?"

Ginny took a step back, and Ron's hands fell from her shoulders. "I... can't tell you," she said hesitantly. "I still don't feel... I know it's not on paper, but even so, it's..."

"Ginny," Ron warned. "I'm telling you, you don't have a leg to stand on with that self-imposed oath crap. I can get it out of you, I can make it so you're required by law to—"

"Then you'll have to do that." Ginny turned and began to walk very quickly back to the Notch. This wasn't what she had anticipated at all.

"Ginny," Ron called, and hurried to catch up with her. "How can you stand up for Malfoy if what you know might help everyone you care about? How?"

"I'm not standing up for Malfoy!" Ginny shouted, and walked even faster. "It's not about *him*, it's about *me*. I care about the oath I made. Money has nothing to do with it."

"Wait up—damn it, Ginny, come on—"

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Harry could hear Ron and Ginny approaching the Notch, but he wished he couldn't. They were arguing. He hadn't really expected their conversation to go smoothly, but he had hoped that it would—he was tired of arguments. He was tired in general. Hermione had stopped by almost immediately after Ron and Ginny had walked out. They had been sitting in front of the fire and chatting for a quarter of an hour, and Harry had hoped that, when Ron and Ginny got back from their walk, the four of them could just sit around and have an hour of peace.

But when Ginny flung open the door and marched inside looking self-righteous, and Ron followed looking fit to kill, Harry knew they were all in for a difficult evening—or at least not a pleasant one. He braced himself.

"Oh, *Ginny*." Hermione jumped up at once and nearly flew across the room to hug her. She seemed oblivious to Ginny's irritated state, and she held her so tightly that Ginny's eyes widened over Hermione's shoulder, and she gasped for breath. "You did it," Hermione was mumbling. "You did it, and I didn't even thank you, I'm so sorry, but I was delirious—you're brilliant. I'll never know how to thank you."

Harry felt a rush of pride. She *was* brilliant.

"You did it too," Ginny said. "I couldn't have helped if you hadn't built that spell." She squeezed Hermione for a moment before letting go.

Hermione stepped back, swiping at her eyes. "I was just there," she said, sniffing happily. "At St. Mungo's. I was telling Harry. My parents have been moved to another wing, and the mediwizards are already working on their muscles—and there's someone else who's going to work with them on speech."

"That's great," Ginny said calmly, though her cheeks were very pink and her mouth was pursed. She shot a sideways glare at Ron before returning her attention to Hermione. "I hope they recover quickly—I'll keep visiting them."

"Thank you. Mum was trying to move her mouth already today. I can't wait to hear her voice." Hermione shone around the room at all of them, but when her eyes landed on Ron, she frowned slightly. "What's wrong?" she asked.

The room went quiet.

"They were just trying to work out something for Malfoy's case," Harry offered, when no one else explained. "Trying to find a way to get information out of him."

"We *found* one," Ron said heatedly. "If she'd just *tell* me."

"She signed a contract—" Harry and Hermione began together.

"She doesn't have to honor that!" Ron said. "Malfoy never paid her! And she *still* won't tell me what she knows, even though she's legally *allowed* to."

"Could you not talk about me like I'm not here?" Ginny snapped, rubbing her temples.

Harry didn't want to be involved in the argument—but he had to ask. "You can tell Ron what you know?" he said warily, turning a bit on the couch to look up at Ginny. "Malfoy didn't pay you, is that true?"

"But I want to keep my *oath*." Ginny rounded on Ron and glared at him. "Ever heard of an oath, Ron? It's like a *vow*. It's something you *keep*." She let out a disgusted breath. "You'd better never marry him, Hermione," she muttered. "Or if you do, you'd better get it all on *paper*."

Hermione went pink and gave Ron a startled, round-eyed look. Ron looked back at her and shook his head vehemently. "I didn't!" he said. "I promise!"

"Be *quiet*!" Hermione hissed.

Harry had no idea what they were on about. He tried to catch Ginny's eye, but she was ranting again.

"*He's* being the stubborn one," Ginny said. "He won't let me go to Culparrat and speak to Malfoy, which is *all* I asked to do—"

"I'm going to get a court order that says you *have* to break your oath and tell me what you know," Ron said, wagging a finger at her. "I can do that, and I *will* do that—"

"And what if I still won't say anything?" Ginny shouted suddenly. "Are you going to put *me* in Culparrat? Force me to take Veritaserum?"

"If that's what it takes!" Ron shouted back, and the two of them glowered at each other.

"Erm, Ron..." Hermione said hesitantly, giving his arm a very ginger pat, "perhaps we should all sit down and talk about th—"

"She might be able to help *you*, Harry," Ron interrupted, making Hermione stop in mid-sentence

and glare at him. "And she could help our dad," Ron went on, counting off on his fingers, "and the Ministry, and all the dragon riders, and she's just being—"

"Unprofessional, he called me," spat Ginny, looking truly furious. "Well, who's unprofessional now, Ron? You're using everyone we know as leverage to try and make me talk, how professional does that make *you*?"

Hermione glanced at Harry, then backed away from Ginny and Ron and took a chair by the fire as they closed in on each other behind the sofa, looking murderous.

"You're *helping* Malfoy," Ron seethed.

"And I should help *you*? I'm sorry, but you're being such a prat that I don't really feel like it!"

"Unprofessional!" Ron shouted. "Right there!"

Ginny's fists clenched, and for a moment, Harry thought that she was going to rear back and punch her brother right in the face. "Well according to you I'm *not* a professional," she finally managed. "Just the other day you said I wasn't licensed, or part of any legally recognized body, so how about you make up your *mind*?"

Ron's fists were clenched too. Harry wasn't sure what he would do if the two of them really went at it—whose side he would take, or if he would even take one. Did brothers and sisters punch each other? He'd never seen any of the Weasleys do it, but Ron and Ginny looked so angry that he simply wasn't sure.

"You're acting like a spoiled little baby," Ron snapped.

Ginny went bright red, and Harry knew why. She hated being called a baby. "And *you're* acting like putting Malfoy in prison should be everyone's number one priority!" she snapped back. "As if nothing else matters just because you *hate* him! Why don't you stop being so bloody *vindictive* for a minute and take the whole picture into account?"

Ron's jaw dropped and his ears flushed. "Just being vindictive, am I?" he asked softly, and somehow he sounded much more frightening that way. "Just putting him in prison over a Hogwarts grudge, is that what you think?"

Ginny didn't answer, but the insolent raise of her chin was enough.

"Forgotten all about the things he's *done*, have you?" Ron's voice was still unnervingly quiet. "Forgotten about last June, and about the Grangers—"

Hermione had been looking from Ginny to Ron and back again, anxiously biting her lips together. But at the mention of her parents she went very still in her chair. She opened her mouth as if to defend Ginny, but never got the words out.

"Don't you dare," Ginny cut in, her voice shaking. "Don't you *dare* say I don't remember those things. I know all of it. I know he's horrible, I know what his father did to you, and to *me*—to all of us—don't you *tell* me I don't know."

Harry felt a chill. It was rare that he even allowed himself to think about Ron's kidnapping, or about the fact that Lucius Malfoy had nearly killed Ginny on the battlefield at Hogwarts, just last June. He would not contemplate the myriad times that he might have lost either of them. Would not do it.

"But Draco *isn't* the same person as his father—" Ginny continued.

Ron gave an inelegant snort. "*Draco*," he muttered. "On a first name basis now, the two of you? How sweet."

Ginny's eyes flitted to Harry and he instantly looked down. He couldn't bear to look at her and remember that he had accused her about Malfoy in much the same way. He couldn't believe he had done that.

"Ron," Hermione said very quietly, "don't say things like that. You know she remembers. She just did something amazing for my parents, and she's only trying to help you."

Her reproach seemed to take the edge off Ron's fury—he blew out a breath and crossed his arms, but Harry thought could read a little bit of guilt in his face.

It was a moment before Ron spoke. "Even if Malfoy hasn't committed as many crimes as his father," he demanded, "how can you want to give him a bargain that lets him go free?" He looked at Ginny, uncrossed his arms, and gestured for an answer. "How? You know he's not innocent of Unforgivables—he can't be. And of all the people to pardon, he just doesn't deserve—"

"*I told you*," Ginny said, enunciating every word as though Ron were either very young or extremely stupid. "I don't *want him free*, but I wonder if there might be a good enough reason to give him that bargain. All I *want* is to ask him some questions and try to work out what he knows and what he's willing to do."

"Willing? Right." Ron sighed in disgust and turned away from Ginny. He went to the chess table, grabbed a chair, thunked it down in front of the fire beside Hermione, and straddled it. "Look," he

said, crossing his arms on the back, "you're not going to get anything out of him. He's a total wanker and he always has been, so you might as well just skip a step and tell me what you know now, or wait until you get ordered by the Ministry and *then* tell me what you know."

Ginny leaned her hands on the back of the sofa; her hair swung forward and brushed Harry's shoulder. "Well, just let me *talk* to him before you do that, would you?"

"There's no point."

"Yes there bloody well is!" Ginny smacked the top of the cushion just behind Harry's head; he jumped in surprise and glanced warily over his shoulder. He'd never seen her quite like this, and he wasn't sure what to make of it. He only knew he never wanted her to glare at him the way she was glaring at Ron right now.

"Explain it, then," Ron demanded.

"I CAN'T!" Ginny shouted. "I can't explain myself completely without giving something away, haven't you heard a word I've said? Why can't you just let me talk to him? What do I have to *say* to you? Why don't you trust me?"

"Oh, here we go with the drama..." Ron rolled his eyes. "Just like Mum, honestly."

Ginny clenched her fists so tightly that the knuckles went white. She came around the couch towards Ron's chair, and Harry again had the feeling that she was going to strike. He felt very uncomfortable—he didn't want to see them fight. Harry had been close to the Weasleys for a long, long time, but he didn't think that he would ever really understand siblings—they loved each other so much, yet turned on each other so quickly, and then they made up without any hesitation... it was too strange.

"You know, Ron," Hermione said thoughtfully, cutting short whatever Ginny had been about to do, "she might be able to get Malfoy to tell you something. She's worked on him, after all, and it says in her textbook that Healers create strong bonds between their patients and themselves, even under the worst circumstances. It might actually be better for you if she spoke to him first."

Ron opened his mouth. He seemed to be trying to think of an argument. He narrowed his eyes up at Ginny. "If you *were* to speak to him, you'd have to tell me every single thing you found out."

Ginny put her hands on her hips. "No," she said at once. "I wouldn't. The kinds of things I feel when I work on people are extremely private. You know you wouldn't like it if I repeated things I knew about you."

Hermione blinked at her. "You've worked on Ron?" she said.

"No," Ginny said, but she dropped her hands from her hips and clasped them tightly behind her back, and Harry thought she might be lying. "But if I had, he wouldn't like it."

Ron looked uncomfortable. He shifted in his seat. "It's—it's not the same," he said desperately. "I'm not hiding things that might really hurt people, but *he* might be. And if he is, then that means *you* are—Ginny, you realize that mediwizards are required to break their oaths for certain reasons, don't you?" He watched her for a moment, and when Ginny looked honestly surprised, he pressed on. "Life-threatening information can be revealed, you know that, don't you? Mediowizards have been kicked off the board for keeping their oaths in certain situations—I have the research in my room."

Ginny was rubbing her head. She seemed utterly confused.

"I don't know," she muttered. "I don't know if he can even *do* anything, it's just a feeling, it's not... Harry." She said his name with sudden determination, turned swiftly and looked down at him.

Harry raised his eyebrows and waited, apprehensive. "Yeah?"

"What do *you* think I should do?"

Harry swallowed hard. She was obviously still angry—and she obviously wanted him to back her up, but he wasn't sure that he could do it. His heart beat quickly and he searched himself for the right response. He wanted her to tell Ron what she knew, but he wanted her to keep her word... he wanted Malfoy to stay in prison, but he wanted Malfoy to come back to Azkaban and get the Dementors back in order, if indeed he could... But what was the *right* thing?

"Would you feel better if you spoke to Malfoy first?" Harry ventured, after what felt like several minutes.

"First?" Ginny repeated dangerously. "Before doing *what*?"

Harry steeled himself. He didn't think she was going to like this part of the answer. "Before... going ahead and telling Ron what you know, or what you think you know."

Ginny paled slightly. "You think I should do that, then?"

"I think... yeah. I think you probably should."

Ginny went quiet. She sat back and looked rather helplessly down at her hands. Her sudden

silence surprised Harry, who had anticipated that she would turn her fury on him next. But instead she looked at the backs of her fingers, then turned her hands over and gazed meditatively at her palms.

"I suppose," she began. "I suppose if... if it's illegal to hold back in life-threatening situations... then I should say something. I didn't realize... But Harry, if you think I really should..."

Ron made a noise of annoyance. "Oh, she'll listen to *him*," he muttered. "That's nice."

"Shh," said Hermione.

Ginny glanced up at Ron, but there was no anger left in her face. "I just don't want to break my word," she said simply. "It makes me feel terrible." She looked at Harry. "I'm not trying to be stubborn, or make things harder on you and Charlie and Dad... I'm just trying to sort this out," she said. "You know how much I want to help you."

A lovely warmth began in Harry's toes and traveled all the way up to his head. The way she was looking at him made him want to kiss her. He knew that she wanted to help him—knew she loved him—and it made all the difference in the world. He wanted to help her just as much. Loved her just as much. It was strange to know that so clearly—but he knew it.

"Let her talk to Malfoy first," Harry said, wrenching his eyes from Ginny and looking at Ron instead. "There's no reason why she can't."

Ron narrowed his eyes and looked from Harry to Ginny, then shook his head and let out a long-suffering sigh. "Oh fine," he said. "Have it your way. I'm telling you he's not going to say anything, it's just going to be a waste of time—but we'll get him Ennervated for you if you want to talk to him so much."

"When?" Ginny asked at once. "I want to do it soon—can I go first thing on Monday?"

"Yeah, that's fine." Ron sighed again. "But you'll need an escort and I can't be there, I have too much to do."

Harry wished he didn't have to go to work. He wanted to be the one to help her, and he didn't trust some random Auror to do it. Moody would be all right, he supposed, but still, he wanted to be there to make sure there wasn't any trouble.

"I can go back to Culparrat on Monday," said Hermione. "And Penny and Fleur and Bill will be there—we're still working on the Enchantment and I wasn't planning to go back yet, but I *have* taken two days off and they might need me. I'll go with you, Ginny."

Harry felt much better.

"Actually," Ginny said slowly, frowning, "Bill might be the best one for it. Just because I might have a question about... something. And he'd be the right one to answer it."

Hermione looked a bit miffed.

"I'm sure you could answer it too," Ginny said quickly. "But he's got field experience."

"Don't get in a snit," Ron said, nudging Hermione with his elbow and looking more relaxed. "You won't want to help her anyway, you'll have your elves to boss around."

Harry shook his head—he had been right. It really was amazing how quickly Ron could recover from a fight.

Hermione's eyes opened wide in indignation. "They are not *my* elves!" she said at once. "And I don't boss them around!"

"Admit it. You tell them right where to go, and they love it."

"That's *not* funny, Ron. They've been oppressed, and if they like to be told what to do it's only because of centuries of horrible conditioning, and I *never* play into that, I'm very careful to consult them—"

Ron snickered and threw his arm around her. "Come here, you lunatic," he muttered, and pulled her chair closer to him with a heave of his arm. "You know I love the elves. No, I really do, I love them. In fact, I think I want one."

Hermione gasped and turned on him, but Ron clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Is everyone happy now?" he demanded, and when there was no answer, he let go of Hermione and gave a satisfied nod. "Good. Back to the match then—is it still on, Harry?"

Harry had been waiting for that question since five minutes after Ron and Ginny had left the house. "No," he said quickly. "It's all over. Sorry—forgot to tell you. It ended while you were out walking."

Ron was very still for a long time. After what seemed like an age, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "The... the semifinals are next week, then?" he asked. His fingers were so tight on the back of his chair that Harry thought he might break the wood. "We know who's going?"

"Yeah," Harry said.

"And... who's going?"

"The Bats, Puddlemere, the Falcons and--well." Harry stopped and shrugged and tried to look sorry. But he could hardly keep a straight face--he knew he wasn't going to be able to get the rest of it out without breaking up--he shot Hermione a panicked look, trying to signal her to take over.

"Spit it out, Potter," Ron said between gritted teeth. "Did. They. Win."

Harry ducked his head. He was going to laugh.

"They did really well until the end, Ron," Hermione cut in smoothly, her voice apologetic. "I listened to the last of it with Harry--the Cannons had a *great* season. No one can say they didn't compete for it this year, and I'm sure Oliver's pleased that he turned the team around the way he did. They'll only improve next year, after all, and won't that be nice?"

Harry was impressed. Hermione hadn't even batted an eyelash.

Ron, on the other hand, looked as though he had just been told that the sun would never rise again. "They... they lost?" he asked blankly. His shoulders sagged. "They lost the match?" He gazed at Hermione. "They were so close," he said. "So close."

"It's all right." Hermione patted his shoulder. "It's only Quidditch."

Ron gave her a look of such horror that Harry laughed out loud, and Ron immediately turned the horrified look on him.

"This is *funny*?" Ron demanded. "You can *laugh*?"

"Well, they played really well," Harry managed. "Really well, right up to the end. I think it's, you know. Worth celebrating." He snickered uncontrollably, and couldn't get himself back together. "You have to, Hermione," he gasped. "I can't."

Ron turned on Hermione. "Have to what?" he said angrily. "Look, *someone* had better tell me what the hell is going on, so that I can go down to the pub and order a bottle of Firewhiskey--"

"There's no need for that," Hermione said, patting his shoulder. "Why can't you just be happy that they did really well until the end? *All the way* until the end, when Knight caught the Snitch."

Ron blinked. He frowned. He tilted his head to one side. "When Knight..." he repeated, as if it were another language altogether.

"They'll be the fourth team in the semis, honestly, I can't see why you're so upset--"

But Harry could no longer hear Hermione. Ron shouted like a maniac, stumbled out of his chair and flung both his arms over his head, nearly knocking Hermione and her chair to the floor.

"YES!" he cried. "I KNEW IT! AND THEY'RE GOING TO TAKE THE SEMIS, TOO--WHO ARE THEY PLAYING--IT'LL BE THE BATS--I CAN'T BLOODY BELIEVE THIS--AND HERE I THOUGHT I'D MISSED THEIR LAST MATCH OF THE SEASON--OH I'LL BE AT THE NEXT TWO--AND THERE *WILL BE TWO* --"

Hermione clapped her hands over her ears.

"That wasn't very nice," Ginny whispered. Her breath caught in Harry's ear and made him shiver. "You had him really scared there for a minute."

"He loves it," Harry whispered back. "Look at him."

Ron had pulled Hermione out of her chair and was trying to dance her around in circles. She was resisting. "I don't *like* the Cannons anymore," she was saying, pushing him off. "You went and gave me that shirt and ruined them for me--"

"Ruined them?" Ron stopped trying to dance. He pulled back, looking wounded, and Hermione dropped her haughty attitude at once.

"No, no, I'm teasing," she said, pulling Ron close again and kissing his chin. "Only teasing, I promise, of course you didn't ruin them, you made them *better*."

Ron looked only partly mollified, but Hermione continued to praise the Cannons to the skies--something Harry was sure he had never heard her do before--until Ron finally grinned again and kissed her with considerable force. Harry looked away a second too late. It wasn't that he minded, exactly, but he wasn't sure they'd ever been so energetic about it in front of him. He wondered what had got into them--especially Hermione. She couldn't be in her right mind.

"Get a room," Ginny muttered.

Harry snorted. And suddenly he became aware of Ginny's freckled, white hand in his. She had pushed her fingers between his own and was running her thumb up and down the side of his index finger, sending chills up his arm. It had been nearly two days since he'd had her alone and he wanted her alone again. Right now. But he wasn't sure how to ask.

"Do you want to... walk me home?" Ginny suddenly whispered in his ear. "Because I should go to bed soon."

Harry's heart gave a nice hard knock. "I'll walk you," he said under his breath, glad that she had given him an in. Together they stood up and slipped past Ron and Hermione, who were very nearly cooing at each other and didn't seem to notice them leaving at all.

"Bye," Hermione said absently, just before the door shut behind them.

The moment they were safely outside, Ginny burst out laughing. "What is *wrong* with them?" she asked, tucking her arm into Harry's. "I've never seen Hermione quite so... erm..."

"Open?" Harry suggested.

"That's one word for it," Ginny said, and sniggered. "They're a pair, aren't they? Ron's a complete mental case—I almost punched him in there, honestly. I can't imagine what you had to put up with in school."

Harry grinned and leaned on her as they walked up the road toward Lupin Lodge. The sky was dark and the moon was waning, and it was peaceful just to be with her, away from light and noise and fighting, away from dragons and prisons and Dementors. There was just Ginny, and the way she made him feel now that things were right again. He felt strong and whole. Far less exhausted. Like he could face anything. Like he really *was* Harry Potter.

"Are you tired?" she said, as they wandered to a stop in the front garden. She turned to him and softly brushed back his fringe as he took her waist in his hands. The apples of her cheeks were pale under the moon, and scattered with freckles, and her hair made a frame around her uplifted face. "Do you feel all right?" She laid the back of her hand to his forehead, and then to his cheek.

"Can't you tell?" Harry asked, surprised.

"If I want to," Ginny said. She dropped her hand to his shoulder and idly began to smooth his T-shirt. "But I don't want to pry."

"It's not prying," Harry said at once. "Honestly—I don't mind that you can just... tell things."

Ginny considered him for a moment. And then she closed her eyes and tilted up her chin, and a tiny crease appeared along her forehead. Harry wondered what she was feeling—whether she could tell how desperately he wanted to kiss her—whether she knew that he wished he could think of a good excuse to come upstairs and sleep beside her again.

"Oh, Harry," she murmured. "How do you even stay awake up there?"

She must have been feeling his day at Azkaban. "I don't know," he answered.

She opened her eyes and looked at him, and there was worry written in her face. "You'll... think I'm horrible," she said. "But I have to tell you the truth."

Harry felt a stab of anxiety. "Yes?"

"It's just..." Ginny looked away. "I probably wouldn't agree to tell Ron anything if I didn't think it could help you," she said. "I know that's wrong."

Harry stared at her. "I'm... going to think you're horrible for that?" he asked.

"I'm not sticking to my word," Ginny said, looking even more distressed. She still wouldn't meet his eyes. "What kind of person does that make me? I just don't want you hurt, and I don't want you so *tired*, and if there's anything he can do, then I want him to *do* it. But it's not right to give in just because of that."

"You're not giving in," Harry said, holding her waist more tightly in his hands and trying to get her to turn to him. "There are plenty of reasons. First, like Ron said, it's illegal for you to keep life-threatening secrets. Second, he's going to get it out of you anyway—if you weren't paid, then that's an end to it."

"I know," Ginny shook her head. "But I would have held out until then, and I just... I can't like myself if I can't keep my word. It's weak."

"Stop. You're going to speak to Malfoy first, which is more than he deserves." Harry took her chin in one hand and made her look at him. She met his eyes with her worried brown ones, and nodded.

"I know."

"And it's not like you made the decision lightly. You're still worrying about it, listen to you."

Ginny smiled slightly. "I know."

"And..." Harry shrugged and ran his thumb along her cheek. "I don't know. I think it's all right to..." He couldn't quite look at her. "To help the people you love," he mumbled quickly.

It wasn't long before he felt Ginny's lips gliding softly along his jaw, toward his chin. "Okay," she said quietly, and kissed his mouth. The kiss was gentle and chaste, and followed by a wonderful, necessary hug—she slipped her arms around him and Harry held her close, amazed by how well she fitted against his body, and how at rest he felt with his head on her shoulder. They breathed together in the garden for a long time.

"You're exhausted," she said eventually, her voice muffled in his shoulder. "You should go to bed."

With you. Say I can stay with you. Harry felt it as hard as he could, and silently begged her to pick up on it. *I need to stay with you...*

Ginny's face grew hot beside his, and her fingers clenched on the back of his T-shirt. "H-Harry..." she faltered.

"Yeah?" he rasped, and went just as hot as she was. His voice was too obvious.

"Do you..." She swallowed, and he heard it in his head. "Do you want to... erm..."

He held tight to her and waited. *Say it. Ask me.* He wished that he could say it, but his bravery did not stretch that far. It had been so much easier the other night, when necessity had led him to her room and her incoherent pleas had kept him there. But Harry didn't know how to conjure another such moment out of thin air. A spell for *that* would have been useful.

"Stay?" It was one word, and very faint. But Ginny had spoken it, her hands sliding down his arms to grip his hands.

Every hair on Harry's body stood on end. "You—" his voice cracked and he buried his face in her shoulder. "You don't mind?"

Ginny shook her head. "I'll... always want you to stay," she whispered quickly, making Harry burn all over. "But you don't have pajamas and a toothbrush and—"

"I'll get them." Harry let go of her and pulled away to find that she was very pink, even in the darkness of the garden. It was somehow pleasing to know that she still blushed because of him. "I'll be right back."

"Come straight to my room," Ginny said. "Apparate in. I don't want Remus or Sirius to know that—"

"No, no, me neither." Harry couldn't imagine. "Just give me five minutes, all right?"

Ginny nodded. And then, before he could draw his wand, she abruptly took his face in her hands and gave him such an unbelievable kiss that he couldn't remember who he was. He could hardly keep his balance. He was reeling. She was brilliant. *Brilliant.* The thought of being without her for two months was so painful that he wasn't quite sure how he had just lived through it. He didn't even want to think about it. He just never wanted it to happen again.

"Oh, Harry," she breathed against his lips, when she had finished. "Harry..." Her fingers trailed down both sides of his face. She bumped her mouth to his again, just briefly—catching his bottom lip with hers and making him wonder if he was going to get any sleep at all. Perhaps this was a really bad idea—not that he was ever going to change his mind. He couldn't do much with his mind at the moment. It had spun out of control.

"Give me ten minutes?" she said. "I have to—to put on my nightdress and—and actually, can you give me twenty minutes?"

Harry nodded. He would have agreed to anything.

Ginny slipped away from him and disappeared into the house with a lingering look over her shoulder before Harry could even draw his wand. He stood staring at the door for a long time before he remembered himself and went home to get his things—and to let Ron and Hermione see him there, so that Ron wouldn't realize he was gone—and to very quietly tell Hermione, though he couldn't make eye contact while he did it, that perhaps she ought to stay the night at the Notch.

* * * * *

"That's it... that's it... one more step... oh, Leo, you *made* it!"

Penelope caught her son up in her arms, fell back in the sand and kissed him absolutely breathless. He could walk. He was amazing. There had never, in the history of man, been a more brilliant child than the one she held in her arms.

"Mama," he protested, and pushed against her with his fat little arms.

"No you don't," she said, and kissed his nose before burying her own nose in his soft fluff of flaming-red hair. He smelled like sea salt and baby powder and a thousand lovely things, and he was getting so big so fast. "You'll never get away from me. Never, never, never—" She nuzzled his head.

"Terrorizing my nephew again, I see." Bill Weasley thudded down beside her in the sand and held his arms out. Penelope put Leo into them without hesitation, and Bill held him out at arm's length, letting his baby legs dangle. "Getting tall, aren't you?"

"Ba," said Leo wisely.

"Nine months," Penelope said proudly, as Bill began to swing Leo gently from side to side. "I can't believe he's walking."

"Percy walked at nine months." Bill looked at her and smiled. "I remember all the stuff he did as a baby—I was seven when he was born, and I thought he was fascinating. I remember when he sat up, and when he spoke his first real word."

"What was it?"

Bill laughed. "Wand. Only he said 'wan'. He used to try to grab Dad's whenever he could. Once he started crawling, Mum was afraid he'd get his hands on one and start using it."

Penelope could well imagine that. And somehow, coming from his eldest brother, comments about Percy were less painful than usual. She leaned back on her hands in the sand, and watched as Bill balanced Leo on his knees and began to bounce him. "I've seen all his baby photos," she said. "Leo really looks..."

"It's uncanny," Bill said, and stopped bouncing Leo for a moment to look at him. "It's wonderful."

"It is. Is it strange that I hope he wears glasses?"

It was a moment before Bill answered. "No, that's not strange," he finally said, his voice low and quiet. "I hope he does too." He kissed the top of Leo's head and then set him on his feet in the sand, between them. "Go and get your mummy," he said, and carefully let him go.

Penelope held out her hands, but Leo did not so much as grab her thumb as he toddled the three necessary steps toward her. He reached her body, fell against it, and laughed the high-pitched, darling laugh that belongs only to babies and very little children. "You're so sweet," she crooned, as she picked him up. "How's the spell coming?" she asked Bill. "I suppose I should go and see if Fleur needs anything."

"She's fine. Her team has everything under control. Culparrat should be secure within a week." Bill gazed across a stretch of rocky shoreline towards Culparrat. Fleur was impossible to miss even at this distance; she sat on a boulder with a map unrolled on her knee, her long, silvery hair fluttering in the salt breeze. "You don't have to stay, really," Bill went on. "You've done all you can, haven't you?"

Penelope shrugged. "I suppose. But it's lovely here, isn't it?"

"Not the roughest job situation I can think of," Bill agreed, looking around. "Reminds me a bit of Egypt, actually—all this sand."

"Though I imagine the temperature makes it hard to pretend."

Bill laughed. "Yeah," he said. "I miss the heat. I wish I could go back—I don't know that I'm particularly going to like France, but..." He looked again towards Fleur. "Did she tell you she got a position at Beauxbatons?"

"No!" Penelope fished a bottle out of Leo's bag and uncapped it. She fought to get him in the crook of her arm, but he didn't seem to be much in the mood—he really was getting big. "What will she be teaching?"

"Advanced Charms. Which is perfect, because Gabrielle's in third year, so they won't be in direct contact that way, but Fleur'll still get to be with her sister on a daily basis, which is what they both want."

Penelope glanced at him. "So you're giving up Egypt and England for that."

Bill half-smiled. "Oh yeah," he said quietly. "No question."

Penelope felt a terrible pang of jealous loss. She tilted up her face and caught the breeze. "Did Gabrielle ever explain how on earth she got to London?" She asked evenly after a moment, wrestling Leo into one arm and sticking the bottle into his mouth. The moment she did so, he went still and clamped both his sticky hands to the sides of the bottle.

Bill looked grim. "At first she claimed she couldn't remember anything, but now she's admitted to her parents that she charmed one of her captors," he said. "She would've been killed like the rest of them if it weren't for her veela blood. She turned on the smile, the magic—all of it—and instead of disposing of her, like he was supposed to, one of her captors took her to his home." Bill's mouth curled. "A grown man," he said in disgust. "Sick bastard."

Penelope was horrified. "Oh God—he didn't—is she—"

"He tried." Bill looked like he was going to be sick. "Gabrielle won't say much about it except that he didn't succeed, and that's when she finally ran away. She says she's not sure how she got away from him—she thinks she remembers kicking him, and I'm sure she did. She's got excellent aim." Bill winced as though he knew something about it. "She ran and hid herself in the darkest place she could find, and it was a day or so before she realized she was on a Muggle ship. By the time she realized it, they were already too far out for her to come back. So she hid, she ate what she could, she..." Bill shook his head. "She's quite something."

"No wonder she ran from every adult who tried to help her," Penelope said angrily. "Filthy man—I hope she's telling the truth and that he didn't get to her."

"So do I."

"Who was he? Where was she?"

"She doesn't know," Bill said. "But she told her parents she remembered a castle on an island, so they'll be interrogating every known Death Eater from the area near Mont St. Michel."

"There can't be many. They'll find him."

"I hope they find him *dead*," Bill spoke harshly, with the same iron and bitterness that Penelope had felt many times.

"Yes," she said quietly, and looked out at the sea. It would have been fair for a man like that to die. But death had no opinions. Death did not assess personal worth. Death was final. Nothing more.

The sea rolled in and out, and Penelope felt as though she were going with it. It was so peaceful here, with nothing but the sea and the sand and her thoughts. And Leo. She gazed down at him and smiled. "I knew you were hungry," she murmured. He had already drained half the bottle. She rubbed his little tummy, and looked back up at Bill. "Does your mother know you're leaving England?"

"I told my parents yesterday," Bill sighed. "Mum's not thrilled, but she's so ecstatic to see me engaged that she didn't try to talk me out of it. And I'll stay here to help my dad until something can be done about the Dementors, so it might be months, or longer, before I can go anywhere."

"When will you get married?"

"Next summer. We all need time."

Penelope nodded. "Where?"

"I have no idea. Frankly, I don't care. I just want my family there—you included, of course—and Adam says that if he can't be in it, he'll have a fit." Bill raised an eyebrow. "I think he just wants to see Gabrielle in her dress robes."

Penelope gave a shocked laugh. "Isn't he a bit young?"

"Not to start noticing, no," Bill chuckled. "Thirteen's rough that way. All you're allowed to *do* is notice—there's no real action for years. Though I expect..."

"Hm?"

Bill shrugged. "Well, they've got a special situation, don't they? They write to each other every day—in each other's languages. The letters are crap, but that's not the point. They took care of each other for more than a year, and that's never going to go away between them." He shrugged again. "I almost wish Adam could come along with us and go to Beauxbatons—I know he misses her."

"Does he want to move away?"

"Oh yes," Bill smiled. "But I told him—in private, of course, didn't want to hurt Fleur's feelings or anything—that Hogwarts beats Beauxbatons any day of the year, and that he'll be sorry if he gives up the chance to go there." Bill's smile became a wayward grin. "And I told him he'll be the one man at school with a girlfriend abroad, which can't be a bad thing."

"Really, Bill!" But Penelope was laughing. "You're horrible."

Bill nodded. "I'm not the oldest for nothing. I've been dishing out bad advice for decades, I'm practically a professional."

"Oh, speaking of which—" Penelope adjusted her arm; Leo was getting heavy. "Will you stay with Gringotts? Work at the Paris branch?"

"For a while," Bill sifted sand in his fingers, examining it and letting it fall back onto the shore. "And you? Will you stay at the Ministry?"

Penelope's eyes traveled back to the sea. The truth was, she could not see herself returning to the Ministry of Magic. Her job there was done. Percy's task had been fulfilled. She felt... free. Alive. She wanted to keep working—to keep thinking and building and mapping magic—but she didn't know how to focus that. She didn't have Hermione's training. And she wouldn't have known what spells to build—the Imprisonment Enchantment had been Percy's need, not hers.

Of course, Hermione had said that the Ministry and other wizarding organizations usually made specific requests of Delia...

Penelope looked down at Leo again. His eyes were closed now, but he was still sucking. He was so young—he would never know it if they spent some time away from England. Away from everything. And the sunshine and the sea would be so good for him—and for her.

"I've thought," she said slowly, "of asking Hermione to introduce me to her friend Delia." She glanced at Bill to gauge his reaction. She hadn't told anyone yet.

"In Cortona?" Bill's eyes brightened. "That place sounds absolutely amazing—are you interested in Thinking, then?"

"I... think I am," Penelope cracked a grin at the unintended pun. "I know Hermione says it's difficult work, and that it doesn't come naturally to her, but I have the strangest feeling that it *would* to me."

Bill glanced at Leo. "You'll take him, obviously." He touched the fluff of baby-bright red hair, and Leo stirred in Penelope's arms.

"I know how much your mum will hate it," Penelope said. "But I... need to be away."

Bill was quiet for a minute. "That's fair," he said. "I can't say I don't know the feeling. And I think you should do what's best for you. You have a right to... move on." He looked as though the words were painful for him. "You might meet someone else. All of that."

"I'm not there yet," Penelope said at once. "Not even close."

"But eventually—what are you, twenty-three?"

The number sounded unimpressively small. Age was so deceptive; Penelope could hardly believe what she had already lived through. "Yes."

"You'll meet someone. Eventually."

It wasn't something she was ready to think about. She wanted no one to invade Percy's place in her heart just now. She wanted only an empty mind and an open soul and the crash of the sea. And Leo. And time. Time to be with herself and to do something useful that was all her own.

"Can I speak for all of us?" Bill asked abruptly.

Penelope looked at him—he seemed very intense about something. "All right," she said.

Bill turned to her in the sand, leaned his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands. "We all thought Percy was mad to get married when he did. You know that."

Penelope didn't need to answer.

"And it was worse, because we didn't really know you, and it didn't make much sense, and none of us ever really... understood Percy. We all thought he was siding with the wrong sort."

There was still no need for an answer, but Penelope found it hard not to let a flash of anger show through. None of them had ever really known Percy—save Molly, perhaps. Not like she had. His own brothers hadn't known him the way he had deserved to be known.

"I know," she said, with as little emotion as possible.

"So his marriage, I have to tell you, meant nothing to me."

Penelope wasn't sure why he was telling her this. It hurt. It made her want to slap him.

"Until I met you, and started working with you, and saw the sort of person you are. It made me..." Bill's eyes were getting bloodshot. "It made me rethink a few things. That's not to say I didn't grieve Percy like crazy straight away—I'm still grieving him. I love him. But at first I was grieving because I loved him when we were kids and because he was my brother—there wasn't much in it that was recently personal, because I didn't get to know him as an adult... am I making sense?"

Penelope nodded. A knot of tears was rising in her throat. She wanted to hug herself but she had to stay relaxed for Leo.

"But knowing you makes me feel like I knew him better," Bill went on. His voice was getting scratchy. "You must have meant the world to him—and don't take this the wrong way, but sometimes I find myself watching you and thinking what he must have seen in you, and thinking that if he was smart enough to see all that, then he was a better man than most of us, at a younger age. The way you handled it when Fleur started crying that day—the day we thought Gabrielle..."

Penelope swallowed hard. "I remember," she managed.

"And how you were with Ginny at Christmas—and how calm you are about your work, and how good you've been with my mother—just... Penny, if he had the sense to marry you, then I misjudged him."

Penelope stifled a sob. This wasn't fair. *Percy* should have heard all this.

"And I want you to know—and I know I speak for all of us—that you're part of this family and you always will be." Bill didn't seem capable of going on. For a minute he sat there and looked into the sand and Penelope could see him swallow several times. "I know... your family doesn't have much to do with the wizarding world. I know you don't have..."

"I don't have them." Penelope knew he wouldn't want to say it. "I had Percy."

"And now you have us. For as long as you want."

Penelope fought hard not to cry; she looked down and blinked hard and tried to stop her shoulders from shaking. Leo was asleep; he had let go of his bottle. It lolled half-in and half-out of his mouth, and Penelope busied herself with picking it up and putting it into her bag.

"And if you *do* meet someone—"

She shook her head vehemently.

"No, I know," Bill said gently. "But later... if you do... then he's welcome with us. Because we won't want to lose you and Leo. And we'll want to make sure he's... worthy of you. All right?"

Penelope nodded, and swiped at her eyes with one hand. "Th-thank you," she whispered. It was so strange to be included in such a family, in such a way. But she appreciated it with all her heart, and she knew that Percy, wherever he was, would have swelled with happiness to see her embraced

like this. "Percy looked up to you so much, Bill," she managed, because now he deserved to hear it. "He really did. You have no idea."

Bill didn't answer, and Penelope didn't look over at him. She knew better than to interrupt what was probably his own private grief. Instead, she rocked Leo and watched the horizon and contemplated the Weasleys. They were an adoptive group—all of them. Never mind the fact that Molly had recently become her own orphanage—it wasn't just about children. The Weasleys simply had a gift for taking in the people who needed them most. She herself was an only child. Hermione was an only child—and Ron had brought Adam home, too. Harry was certainly an only child, and not only had Ginny taken to him, but the Weasleys as a unit had absorbed him from the very beginning. Only Fred had married a girl with siblings. But then, Fred and George never could do anything by patterns.

Penelope smiled a little. She really did know them. It made sense that she was part of them—even if it was very odd without Percy there to connect her. And she would miss them, when she went away. But she would come back to them, because Leo needed to know the people who had shaped his father's life. And because, much as she needed her own space, she needed them too.

"Bill?"

The shout came from somewhere down the beach, opposite from the direction of Culparrat. Both Penelope and Bill turned their heads and peered down the shoreline to see two girls, one with unruly brown hair and one with a Weasley-red ponytail, picking their way along the rocky shore and hurrying towards them.

"Hermione!" Penelope exclaimed. She hadn't expected to see her back for several days at least.

"Ginny?" Bill called at the same moment. "What are you doing here?"

"I thought you'd be at St. Mungo's—both of you!" Penelope said.

Hermione and Ginny drew closer, breathing rather hard, and both of them grinned.

"Hi, Penny," Ginny said. She looked rather tired, but she was still smiling as she put out her hands to Bill. "Come and help me with something, would you? I need an escort."

Bill took her hands and was pulled to his feet. "Where are we going?"

"To talk to Draco Malfoy," Ginny said. "Come on."

Bill frowned. "Really?" he asked. "I don't know that it's a very good idea to talk to him—or if you'll even be allowed. I know you worked on him, Ginny, but he's Stunned and—"

"You would have known all about it if you'd been inside and anywhere near a fireplace," Ginny said. "Moody's waiting for us. It's for Ron—for the Ministry. I need to speak to him, come on."

Hermione dropped into the sand where Bill had been. "Good luck," she said. "Oh, and Ginny—do you know where to go?"

"I'll tell her," said Penelope. "You haven't been since we changed the entrance path, and it's not the same. There's less safe space—the charms are much more comprehensive now. See the guide ropes?" She pointed.

Both Ginny's and Hermione's gazes followed her finger to a path. It was lined by ropes that hung like magical banisters, and it led to the front doors of the prison.

"Keep between the ropes if you want to stay in one piece," Penelope advised. "Bill knows where everything is."

Ginny nodded and grabbed Bill's hand. "Come on," she said. "I don't want to be late, I don't know what Moody would do."

"See you," Bill called over his shoulder as Ginny dragged him off towards Culparrat.

Penelope watched them go with a strange, protective warmth in her heart. They weren't really her family. But... they sort of were. It felt like they were, in all the important ways.

"You look happy," Hermione said. "Is something going on?"

Penelope could have asked Hermione the same question—Hermione was pink-faced and still grinning. She looked like she had just been made queen of the universe as she flopped back in the sand and sighed. "It's a lovely day, isn't it?"

"It's about to rain," Penelope said dryly, not sure if she had ever seen Hermione behave with such abandon. But it made sense for Hermione to be out of her mind with happiness. She had just got her parents back, after all.

"Well, but the sea looks lovely in any weather. Hello, Leo," Hermione crooned, rolling towards Penelope and very softly kissing the top of Leo's head. "I don't want to wake him," she whispered, and rolled onto her back again. "Oh, it's nice here. If I had to be in prison, this would be the place."

Penelope laughed. "You're delirious."

"That's very true." Hermione sat up and squinted towards Culparrat. "Where are the elves?"

"Underground, setting up the kitchens. They don't need help, I already tried."

"Oh." Hermione looked a bit put out. "I suppose that's good."

"Yes." Penelope gave her a sidelong look. "May I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"Do you think you'll go back to train at Cortona?"

Hermione blinked at her. "Oh," she said. "I... no. Not now. I want to be with my mum and dad."

"And after that?"

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know. There are other things I want to try. But it's possible. I might." She looked out at the rolling waves. "There are things I miss about it," she said, more quietly. "It was gorgeous there. And Delia was incredibly patient."

"Would you..." Penelope took a breath. "Would you mind introducing me to her?"

"Introducing?" Hermione gave her a swift, confused look. "Is she coming here, or—did I miss something while—"

"No, no." Penelope shook her head. "I'm thinking of... possibly going *there*."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Oh!" she said. "Really?"

Penelope nodded. "Would you write me a letter of recommendation, based on what we've done here?"

Hermione looked even more shocked. "Me?" she said, and then a smile split her face. "I've never written one!" she said. "Of course I will! That's going to be so much fun—do you want to apprentice as a Thinker? Is that why you're going? Is there anything you specifically want me to note, in the letter? When do you think you'd like to visit? Will Leo come on the first trip? Can I help you with anything—would you like me to draw up a list of the things I found helpful? You're going to love it—you're so much calmer than I am! You're going to be so much better—Delia's going to make so much more progress with you than she *ever* did with me—"

Penelope didn't try to stop Hermione as her tirade rambled on. It was a very nice tirade, and as it continued it contained within it several useful bits of information. And it obviously made Hermione happy to indulge in it... and Penelope didn't have anywhere to be, anyway. Leo was fast asleep and the prison was under very good regulation.

So she sat on the shore at Culparrat, holding her son in her arms and listening Hermione talk about magical theory and the beauty of island living. And she felt, for the first time in a long time, that life was going just as it was supposed to.

* * * * *

"Hurry up," Ginny said, pulling her hand out of Bill's as she led the way to the guide ropes. "I'll be late."

Culparrat loomed before them, strange and terrible, rising from the sea. It was not a welcoming sight, but at least the area surrounding it was mostly clean of emotion—probably because the prisoners within were still Stunned. Ginny hoped it wouldn't be too overwhelming when she went inside.

"No one's awake in there, are they?" she asked.

"Just the Aurors," Bill said. "No one else will be woken until all the charms are in place—that'll be a few days yet. They've all been moved to individual cells, though."

Ginny stopped at the guide ropes and pointed between them. "This path is all right?"

"As far as I know."

It wasn't a comforting answer, but Ginny forged ahead.

"I thought you'd be resting this week," Bill said, as he followed. "After what you did for the Grangers and everyth—"

Ginny stopped and turned to find Bill looking at her with admiration. "Who told you?" she demanded. It wasn't that she didn't want him to know, but she certainly hadn't had a chance to tell anyone.

"Remus told Mum and Dad," Bill answered. "Mum wanted to go straight over and see you in the middle of the night, but Remus said you were too tired to do much but sleep, and that you'd probably sleep for a day or so."

Ginny had a moment of pure panic at the thought of her mother coming over to see her and finding her in bed with Harry. She wondered if Remus had realized that Harry had been in there with her, and felt uncomfortably warm at the idea that he might have.

"He said you'd get in touch as soon as you were rested. But we all know already."

"All?"

"Dad told me straight away, and Mum told the twins—I told Charlie and Fleur and... well. We've practically told the world."

Ginny bit her lip. "Oh," she said happily, and turned back to continue walking. It was nice to know that she was being bragged about by everyone. She went confidently forward, the salt breeze pulling wisps of hair out of her ponytail. The wisps tickled her face and she slapped them back.

"What's all this about anyway?" Bill asked, as they picked their way over a rocky section of the shore. It was more difficult to stay between the guide ropes here—it was all Ginny could do to keep her balance. She stumbled forward, caught herself just before crashing through one of the ropes, and straightened up.

"That was close," she said, hoping her voice did not reveal what a scare she'd just had. She turned to follow the guide ropes sharply to the right.

"Wait a minute," Bill said. He grabbed her elbow and stopped her in her tracks. "Don't move."

Ginny froze, knowing that it was for her own good. He was a curse breaker, and probably knew how to tell when he was about to walk into something painful.

"*Aperecium*," Bill muttered.

The empty air into which Ginny had almost stepped glowed suddenly bright, revealing an ugly, impenetrable web of barbed, spidery red lines, several meters thick and forty feet high. The massive red tangle arched across the sky to touch the lowest parapet of the prison, a hundred feet away. Ginny's stomach dropped.

"OI! DON'T MOVE!" A young man raced up the path towards them, repositioning the guard ropes as he came forward. He was dressed in dark blue and wore a temporary Ministry identification badge, and Ginny knew he must have been on the Charms team. "I just finished that section a moment ago," he said hurriedly. "Haven't had a chance to move the—"

"We might have *splinched*," Bill said angrily.

"I'm sorry." The man looked sincerely shaken. "I wasn't warned that anyone was coming. This way—it's this way, that's it, Miss, watch your step..."

He ushered them in a safer direction and Ginny went forward more slowly than before, no longer minding that Bill's hand was tight around hers. She had no desire to be split in half. Both she and Bill were so intent on getting to the door in one piece that they didn't speak again until they were inside. They showed their identification to the Aurors and were led down a dank, torchlit corridor and through an archway, into a spiraling stairwell. They began to climb, following their guard.

Ginny knew she should have been curious about her strange surroundings—or at least disgusted by the fishy smell that had filled her nostrils—but now that they were inside her mind turned to Malfoy, and what she was here to do. She wondered if Ron was right, and it was just a waste of time.

"So," Bill said. "Is this about..." He trailed off, glanced up the stairs ahead of them at the guard, and continued more quietly. "About your gift?"

Ginny shook her head—then nodded. "Sort of. I'm not going to be using it now, or anything. I just—well, I can't tell you much. I'm sorry."

They came to a landing, turned, and continued to climb the stairs. Ginny's heart began to pound, and not out of nervousness over Malfoy—she hadn't had to climb so many stairs in a row since Hogwarts.

"Why do you want me here then?" Bill asked, his breath coming shorter. "Damn, it's like going to Divination, isn't it?"

Ginny shot him a grin. "Yeah. And I want you here because I need—someone outside the door in case—something goes wrong." She was getting out of breath.

"Why not an-Auror?" Bill asked, panting just as hard as they rounded onto another flight of steps. "I mean, I'm glad it's—me, but—wouldn't you rather—"

Ginny shook her head and concentrated on climbing for a moment. She began to use the banister for support.

When they turned again and continued to climb, Ginny blew out an aggravated breath. "How high up—is he?" she asked the Auror. Her legs were beginning to burn.

"Top floor," the Auror replied, not at all out of breath. "Order of Mr. Weasley."

"And which—Mr. Weasley—might that have been?" Ginny asked, though she knew full well which.

The Auror glanced over her shoulder, clearly surprised. "Mr. Ronald Weasley," she answered. "The more serious the crime, the higher up the criminal."

"But Malfoy's—not even—convicted yet."

The Auror shrugged. "I don't help decide these things. I'm just in training."

They began to climb yet another set of stairs, and Ginny made a mental note to put a Marathon Hex on Ron when she got home. She wanted to see him run a few miles.

"This is the last flight," said the Auror, as they turned once more and began to climb again. The

stairs were so narrow here that they had to walk in single file, and so dark that all three of them had to light their wands. Ginny's legs were sore—it hurt to breathe—she had to distract herself.

"How did you—know to—pull me back?" she asked. "When I almost walked into the—splinch border?"

Bill gave a short, breathless laugh. "Instinct," he managed.

Ginny was alarmed. "You didn't—see some sort of—sign?"

"Nope."

"Do you—always go on—instinct when you're—in the desert and—stuff?"

Bill laughed again. "Yeah," he said. "But don't tell Mum."

Ginny didn't have the breath to giggle. They finally reached a corridor—a nice, *flat* corridor—and rested for a moment at the top of the stairs before following the Auror to the right, towards an arching iron door. From behind it there came a muffled voice. The voice was arrogant. Furious.

"Malfoy," Bill muttered. "You have to go in alone, I take it?"

Ginny nodded, clutching the stitch in her side, and followed the Auror towards the door. As she got closer, the voices behind it became easier to understand.

"Well, we can deal with your choice of Defender right now, Mr. Malfoy," Moody was saying, "and you can go right back to your nice bed while we do it. Or you can speak to the Healer first. She's on her way. It's up to you."

"Up to *me*." Malfoy's voice was an animal snarl. "If it were up to *me*, the Healer would be imprisoned for her breach of contract and *she* would be the one in this *cell*—"

"I take it you'd rather not speak to her," said Moody dryly. "Right. Back you go—"

"STOP." Malfoy's breathing was ragged. "I'll speak to her. And then I expect this nightmare of a legal system to right itself and provide me time alone with my *private* Defender."

"Would you listen to him," Bill muttered. "Still thinks he's on top of the world."

"And," Malfoy ranted on, "whichever one of your so-called Aurors manhandled me and took my clothing and possessions can expect to be charged with assault and theft."

Bill snorted. "Delusional."

Moody thunked his way into the corridor, shut the cell door, and pinned both his eyes on Ginny.

"He's all yours."

Ginny nodded, unsettled by the magical eye, which seemed to see straight through her. She wondered if she would ever get over the paranoid suspicion that Moody was really someone else. That eye had been pinned on her all too often in her third year, and she didn't like to be reminded of it.

"Can I ask a favor?" she ventured.

"Earplugs?" Moody returned, making Bill laugh.

Ginny smiled a little. "No... I just need Malfoy's possessions and clothing sent up, if that's possible."

"Certainly." Moody pointed to the Auror who had been their guide. "See to it."

The Auror seemed to be holding in a sigh as she turned to face another long trudge on the stairs, but she disappeared into the stairwell without protesting.

"Watch yourself, Miss Weasley," said Moody, gripping the door handle. "There's a shield up in the middle of the cell in order to keep you out of Malfoy's reach during this meeting. The shield is marked on the floor. Don't cross that line, or you'll get a nasty shock."

"I won't," Ginny said, and put out her hand. "Oh, wait—"

Moody paused before opening the door.

"Is the room being watched?" Ginny asked, hoping the answer would be no. "Is there surveillance?"

"None that's set up yet, no," said Moody. "There's no reason for it until the prisoners are woken—why, would you like me to—"

"No." Ginny was relieved. "That's fine." She narrowed her eyes at his magical one. "No peeking," she said.

Moody gave her a narrow look, but nodded his agreement and asked no questions.

"Well, I'll be right out here," Bill said over her shoulder. "Be careful."

Ginny nodded, and Moody limped back, pulling the door open so that she could see...

Was that Malfoy?

Forgetting her worries, Ginny walked into the cell and stared at him. She heard the door scrape shut behind her—heavy metal grating on cold stone—but although it might have given her a pang of uncertainty to be locked in a room alone with Draco Malfoy, it didn't scare her to be trapped in a

room alone with this dingy, wasted...

Prisoner. Everything about him screamed *prisoner*. The flat, ugly gray robes, the shapeless brown shoes, the colorless, dirty hair that fell into his face and would not stay back no matter how he pushed it. The puffy, shadowed skin of the gaunt face—the greenish tinge to his perspiring flesh—he had not been able to put up his Glamour since they had taken his wand away, and he looked more ill and exhausted than ever; the moisture and mildew of Culparrat were doing nothing to help him. He paced maniacally in his limited space—back and forth—back and forth again—getting nowhere, rubbing frantically at the place on his finger where the ring had been. His energy was riddled with frustration. Helplessness. And rage—rage so complete that Ginny had to steel every nerve against it.

Malfoy's pacing suddenly stopped, as if he had just realized for the first time that Ginny was in the room. When he turned his eyes on her, they gleamed with an unnatural light. He looked just as he had when he'd been drunk in the Leaping Fish—but he was stone sober.

It was frightening.

"Come to survey your handiwork, have you?" His voice was cold and hoarse, and Ginny felt a pang of irrational guilt.

"I didn't break our contract."

Malfoy leered. He took a step towards her and Ginny took an involuntary step back, forgetting what Moody had said about the shield. It might have been there, but it was invisible, and there seemed to be no barrier at all between herself and Malfoy.

"Oh, of *course* you didn't," he breathed. "It's all an amazing *coincidence*. I should have known better than to expect a Weasley to hold to such a binding. I should have known better than to..." His hands came up and scraped wildly at his hair. His eyes unfocused. "To trust you..."

Through the guilt, Ginny felt a flash of triumph. So he had trusted her. Then she had got through to him—she had helped him a little—and so she must be able to exercise some small measure of influence over him. Perhaps there was a way to make him talk, and if she maneuvered very carefully then she would find it.

"I *didn't* break our contract," she repeated, concentrating on sending that truth through to him. "I'm here to help you."

"*Help* me?"

Malfoy took another step towards her and Ginny forced herself to stay still—she didn't have to move back. Her eyes searched the ground for the mark that Moody had talked about—and there it was. The stones that ran horizontally across the floor between herself and Malfoy glowed silver. There was strong protective magic at work there, and Malfoy must have known it would have hurt him; for all his intimidating advances, he was nowhere near it.

"Help me, Weasley?" he repeated. His eyes slid over her face and his mouth split in an ugly smirk. "However do you intend to help me when you look like you haven't slept in weeks?"

Ginny tensed—but then, he didn't know why she was tired. He knew so little of what had recently happened. He wouldn't have any idea of what had happened with the Grangers, and it was better that way.

"Up late last night shagging Potter, no doubt." Malfoy's smirk widened as though he believed he had said something that would upset her.

Instead, into her mind there flashed an image—Harry's face above her—Harry in her bed, as he had been last night. They hadn't done what Malfoy had suggested, but there had been moments when Ginny thought they might forget themselves. She knew that she had forgotten nearly everything else while they had kissed and touched each other—she had certainly forgotten the time. It had been three o'clock in the morning before they had realized it, and they had both groaned, thinking of how painful it would be to get up in the morning, before forcing themselves to lie still together. And even then, they had been unable to lie still. Her hand had found his hand, and his head had turned on the pillow and his lips had brushed her lips, and Ginny couldn't remember if the kiss had ever finished or if she had drifted off with Harry's mouth still softly aligned with hers—

"Good *Lord*," Malfoy spat, bringing her back to her senses. She jumped and stared at him. "That wasn't an invitation to *fantasize*."

Ginny snorted. "Well I didn't bring it up, did I?" she shot. "And yes," she added, trying to return to the conversation at hand. "I'm here to help you."

"He does have a small fortune, I'm told," said Malfoy, ignoring her. He walked to the back wall and relaxed against it, crossing his arms and his ankles and staring dead ahead at her in as satisfied and arrogant a manner as he possibly could in his ruined state. "So you've finally found a steady source of pocket change. Well, well, Weasley. It is the world's oldest profession."

Ginny was sickened, but determined not to show it. "Look," she said, already feeling weary. She

had forgotten how draining he could be, and how he seemed to know all the most intimate ways to insult her. "Do you want my help or not?"

"You want to Heal me, you want to *help* me." Malfoy's voice was full of scorn. He uncrossed his arms and began to rub again at the empty place on his ring finger. "*Please*, Weasley. Give me one reason why I should believe you."

The air around Ginny surged suddenly and she felt a strange softness in it. A dark vulnerability. He really wanted an answer.

"Or is this just more of your practice?" he demanded. "Come to use me? Is that how you plan to improve your skills? By forcing yourself on prisoners who don't have a choice—"

"All *right*," Ginny had to work to contain herself. If there hadn't been a barrier between them, she would have been tempted to slap him. "The truth is, I wasn't only doing it to help you. The *truth* is that I didn't like sitting near you on that broom, and I wanted to make it easier for myself, so I decided to work on you—for *me*. Not for you. But you agreed to let me, and I have never, *never* told anyone what I felt, or what I know."

Malfoy's eyes flashed. "Know?" His voice was half-frantic. "Just what do you think you know, Weasley?"

Ginny felt his fear. His anger. And she decided it was right to use it against him.

"I know that you're rubbing your finger because you miss that ring," she said quietly.

Malfoy jumped. His relaxed posture stiffened entirely—he took two steps away from the wall, then snatched his hands back and looked at her in surprise, which shifted immediately to anger. He tossed his head.

"I've been stripped of my clothing and possessions while I was unconscious, like a common ruffian," he hissed. "Of *course* I want my possessions back, you idiot. That ring is worth more than your family's entire assets, I'm sure. I want it *back*."

Ginny only shook her head. "It's no good trying to hide it. I *felt* it. I *know*..." Her voice trailed off. She didn't exactly know what the ring was capable of. But she knew that if she was ever going to bluff him, then she would have to make her best guess now. "I know about the Dementors," she said evenly, her heart thudding. *Please let me be right, please let me be right...*

Malfoy's eyes widened, and for a moment he was obviously rattled. But his eyes narrowed again before Ginny could be sure she had cornered him, and he advanced, taking a slow, deliberate step towards the shield that separated them.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said coldly. But the way he was moving—the way he was staring at her—

Ginny opened herself to everything his energy could tell her, and she knew that she was right. He was terrified. And furious. She had got it *right*. A powerful thrill surged through her—this was going to work. This was going to *work*.

"Yes you do," she said, keeping her voice as even as his. "You know exactly what I'm saying. And I think you also know that if my brother hasn't asked you anything about this, then it means I haven't told him anything about it."

Malfoy's energy surged with sudden confusion—his narrow stare faltered—his mouth dropped partway open. At once, he seemed to realize that he was gaping, and he snapped his mouth shut and gestured imperiously with his hand as though trying to prove his nonchalance—but the movement was jerky. And in his eyes there was the bright, fierce terror of an animal that had met its match.

Ginny pressed her advantage. "I don't know if anyone's told you about the way the Dementors have been acting since you were arrested," she said.

At once, Malfoy's demeanor shifted. Anger swept him again, knocking defeat and vulnerability aside. "No one's told me *anything*, damn it!" he nearly shouted. "I've been Stunned in this bloody cell for weeks. Are you completely stupid? How on earth did *you* people defeat the Dark Lord—you're imbeciles, all of you—*imbeciles*—"

He was losing all control, and Ginny watched him as he disintegrated before her, feeling both ugly satisfaction and true pity. He was a ruined person. He had given away his life for something that had never existed, and never would exist. And now all promise of it was gone, and this was what he had left. This cell, this hatred...

And that ring.

"Are *you* stupid, Malfoy?" she said softly, when he stopped ranting for a moment to take a deep, gasping breath. "Don't you see I'm the last resort? Keep up your insults and I'll go, and then where will you be?"

Malfoy gave her a hollow, violent look, then swung his head away and looked at the wall.

"The Dementors are out of control," Ginny told him. "People *have* noticed that it's only happened since you've been gone, but no one can work out *why*."

There was another pause. Ginny listened to his labored breathing for a moment before pressing on.

"Some people think it's the lack of a more experienced rider."

Malfoy's fingers clenched, then uncurled slowly.

"But that's not it, is it?" Ginny said, even more softly. She was following her gut. Her instincts. The air in the room was thick with confusion and grief—anger and helplessness—he didn't know how to answer, or what to do. He only knew that he was caught—she could *feel* that he knew it.

A moment later he looked up at her, flat gray eyes resigned. "How should I know?" he drawled—but it was not the old drawl. It lacked its usual luster. "Do I look like a Dementor to you, Weasley?"

Ginny held his gaze for a long moment. "Let's have a look at your ring, shall we?" she finally said.

Malfoy's head snapped up. His eyes went wide with shock and suspicion. "Don't touch a *thing* of mine—"

But Ginny had already turned to the door. She opened it and slipped out, shutting it behind her.

Both Bill and Moody looked ready for a report.

"I'm not finished," she said. "I need his things."

Bill handed her the wooden crate that held all of Malfoy's belongings. Ginny fished around inside it until her hand touched something hot and sharp that made her cry out in pain.

"What is it?" Bill asked anxiously. "Here, give me that—is there a nail or something?"

But as Bill reclaimed the box, Ginny lifted her hand out of it, cradling something small and gaudy-gold in the middle of her palm. Her arm was shaking. It hurt so badly that she wasn't sure she could stand it for another second, but she had to carry it in there, she had to be able to use it—but she couldn't—she was going to scream—

Moody plucked the ring out of her hand before she made a sound. Ginny's arm fell to her side and she slumped, leaning against the stone wall for balance.

"That's quite a piece of jewelry," Moody said, shrewdly observing Ginny. "Care to enlighten us?"

"Not yet," Ginny managed. "But I need a way to—carry it. I can't touch it."

Bill pulled his wand and looked ready to do another revealing spell like the one he had done on the Imprisonment Enchantment outside.

"No—" Ginny put out a hand to stop him. "Not yet. So far he believes I haven't told anyone anything. And so far I haven't. I won't lie to him."

Moody gave her another long, shrewd look. He opened his mouth as if to say something, and then he shut it. Gripping Malfoy's ring tightly in one gnarled fist, he dug into the wooden crate with the other. "Here," he said after a minute, slapping a pair of black leather gloves into Ginny's hands. "He was wearing these when we took him off the dragon. Put them on."

Ginny stared. Of *course*—his gloves. That was why she had never felt the ring before that day at the Manor. That was why it had never hurt her, all those days on the broom. He had been wearing his gloves, and underneath the gloves he'd been controlling things with that *ring*...

She pulled the gloves on as fast as she could and reached out for the ring. Moody dropped it into her cupped hands and Ginny winced, waiting for pain. But there was no pain.

"Thanks," she said, and went towards the door again. "Would you?"

Bill pulled open the door and Ginny went back into Malfoy's cell. He was standing very close to the invisible shield, his eyes wild as they fell on the golden ring in her hands.

The door slammed shut, leaving them in silence. Ginny waited until she knew Malfoy could no longer stand it, and then she picked up the ring in two fingers and held it aloft.

"Very fancy," she said, and pretended to admire it. "Oh, look at the *M*. Very nice. We all wondered why it stayed burnt into Ron's temple for so long—but then perhaps that's why you dropped the charges against him so suddenly. Didn't want anyone looking into that, did you?"

Without taking his eyes off the ring, Malfoy put out his hand. "Give it to me," he ordered. His hand trembled.

"How does it work?" Ginny asked simply. "You might as well tell me."

Malfoy went paler than usual, then shook himself and rolled his eyes dramatically. "You pick it up and put it on your *finger*," he taunted, "where it will be generally seen as a sign of good taste and good fortune. Perhaps you use rings for a different purpose? Or perhaps you've never owned one."

But his insults were worth nothing now. He was transparent. "No, no," she said, forcing a light laugh. "That's exactly how *I* use rings. I imagine that's how most people in the world use them."

She closed one hand around it and held up her other, gloved fingers. "Funny I can't even touch this one because it's full of Dark magic."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed, and his hand remained outstretched. "Those are *my* gloves- " he began, but Ginny cut him off.

"Interesting how it seems to have an effect on Dementors. And-" Ginny guessed again. "And dragons."

Malfoy's face lost its remaining color, and Ginny continued on, now knowing she was right.

"Because it was the dragons too, wasn't it? How else could you have made Norbert so tame just by raising your hand? How else could Mordor have been the *only* dragon who stayed calm after all those months?" Ginny's mind was spinning. So much was beginning to make sense. "The other dragons went wild, didn't they-but Mordor never tried to throw you-he just sank down to the sea-because he *was* affected like the rest of them, but you weren't letting him react naturally-you had him under control, didn't you?"

Malfoy looked very gray.

Ginny couldn't believe none of them had seen it. She could hardly get all the words out. "You don't have a *gift* with dragons-it just looked like you did-that's what's good about a ring, isn't it? You just wear a glove and raise your hand and it seems you've got power-but it's all just borrowed, isn't it? None of it was ever really *you*."

Malfoy's hand twitched. For a moment, Ginny could read struggle in his face, and then his arm dropped to his side and he took a deep breath. His shoulders nearly relaxed. Nearly.

"Even if you were right," he said, his voice low and shaking, "none of this will be useful to you in court once it is proved you violated your contract--"

"Oh, but I *didn't*. And I still don't have to." Ginny pushed the ring over the tip of one gloved finger and held up her hand as if she planned to wield its power.

Malfoy gave her a fleeting look that was half plea, half murder.

Ginny held her palm towards Malfoy, the way she had seen him do with Norbert. "I can just give this ring to Sirius Black," she said, "and see what he makes of it. I won't have to say a *word*. I imagine you know how much he'd like to be able to control the Dementors-he'd work it out. Perhaps he should have it."

"NO!"

The word had burst out of Malfoy-apparently before he could stop it. He stood panting at the edge of his space, far too close to the barrier, a pink tinge rising in his cheeks. He looked outraged, but seemed to realize that even the one word had been as good as an admission of guilt-he threw back his head and made a noise almost like a growl.

"No?" Ginny asked very softly, flexing her hand wide. "And why not? What would happen if I--"

"Take it off," he whispered hoarsely, dropping his gaze to stare at the ring again. His chest rose and fell rapidly and all around her in the air Ginny felt his terror. "Take it off," he repeated harshly. "Before you kill us both, you *stupid* girl."

Ginny felt a thrill of fear. At the same time she felt something begin to course into her arm. Something that had nothing to do with Healing. Something nauseating in its total power-a power she had felt more deeply than she wanted to remember. It was flooding her. Taking root in her.

"Imperius," she whispered, as her body began to shake. "Isn't it?"

Malfoy's eyes did not leave the ring. "If you believe it is as simple as that, Weasley," he managed, "if you believe the Dark Lord used only magic that *your kind* can name and understand... then by all means..." He sounded as though he could hardly breathe. "Use it. Be more fool than you already are. He was stronger than any of you ever began to comprehend."

Voldemort had given this object power. Riddle. Tom.

Ginny gagged; frantically she tugged the ring off her finger and threw it to the floor-it made a ringing noise and rolled to the place on the floor where the stones shone silver. It rolled in dizzying circles, then fell flat, just inches from Malfoy.

Malfoy fell to his knees-he made an instinctive lunge-his hand hit the invisible barrier and he shouted in terrible pain. There was a *crack!* and a burst of red light, and Malfoy was thrown all the way back to the wall where he sat sprawled, his breath heaving through his open mouth, his eyes squeezed shut, his whole body slack and trembling. He was very close to tears.

"Ginny!"

Bill's voice. Ginny turned to see both him and Moody in the doorway, their wands drawn.

"What happ--"

"Go," Ginny said quickly. "We're not finished."

"Oh *yes* we *are*."

She turned back to see that Malfoy's eyes had opened into slits. They cut into her.

"Get her out," he commanded, trying to point. But his hand faltered and his arm dropped to his side. He didn't have the strength. "Get her *out*."

Ginny whirled and shook her head pleadingly at Bill and Moody. "No," she said. "No, I need more time."

They both looked dubious, but nodded and backed away again.

"I SAID, *GET HER OUT*—" Malfoy shouted, from where he was still crumpled on the floor. The door slammed in spite of his order, and he made a strangled noise. "You'll get *nothing* from me," he spat at her, his head lolling against the wall. "I'll *never* help you, Weasley, you're wasting your *time*." He cradled his shocked hand in his good one. "And when it comes out what you've done—"

"You never paid me." The words were quiet but sure, and they silenced him as fully as Ginny could have wished.

He gaped for a moment, and then—"I don't see what—"

"Our contract was based on payment. And I didn't take any pay."

Malfoy stared up at her, panting. His last hope was gone—Ginny felt it go—leaving his situation entirely bleak and miserable. There was no way out for him now.

"But I—I paid you," he stammered. "It's not my fault if you refused—"

"Our contract is null and void," Ginny said, taking Ron's words. "I still haven't gone back on it, because I believe it's still an oath, money or not. But Malfoy..." She fixed a serious look on him. "Understand this now. I'm not legally bound. In fact, if I'm charged by the Ministry to do it, then I'll *have* to tell everyone what I know. And you know it'll happen. My brother will make sure I'm charged to do it."

"And you—you'd break your *oath*?" Malfoy was obviously scrambling for arguments now. "You, a Healer—you even said that it wasn't about money—you'd go back on your word—you'd put forth my private—"

"Yes I would." She gazed pitilessly at him. "And you can stop playing it up for my sympathy. You won't get it."

Not quite under his breath, Malfoy called her several filthy names.

"That won't help you."

"And *I won't help you*," he choked, struggling to get to his feet. But he couldn't get his legs under him—his collision with the barrier had weakened all his muscles; he was shaking like jelly. He dropped straight down again, still sprawled and panting. "So," he barked. "I'm to stay here for life, am I?" He gave a wild, awful laugh. "No honor left in any of you, is there? At least I'll know that all of you will *suffer* without my help. *Suffer*. Potter will spend his life keeping back those Dementors and he'll die young—you know he will. He already looks like hell. Imagine him in five years."

Ginny's fists clenched.

Malfoy laughed at her. "Yes, that's right. All that work defeating the Dark Lord just to die a slow and painful death on dragonback. What terrible irony. What a *shame*."

"That doesn't have to happen," Ginny managed. "That ring is enough to hold back the Dementors—"

"As if I'm going to tell *you* how to use it," Malfoy sneered. "No, let him die. Let your brother waste his life. Let the Ministry waste its money—let your father look like the murdering fool he is. He'll have to step down as soon as the public is tired of his ineptitude with the issues at Azkaban—not that anyone who succeeds him will manage any better." Malfoy gave a maniacal laugh. "And you'll have to watch it all, won't you? Because all the Healing power in the world won't be able to stop it. You'll have to heal the dragons again and again—you'll never have a chance to use your talents for any other reason—and you'll watch Potter waste away in front of you while you do it—"

"While you *rot*," Ginny whispered, her eyes full of tears. He was sick. He reminded her strongly of someone else. Someone equally sick, whose personal bitterness had become a terrible war. "And you won't be Stunned, Malfoy. You'll be wide-awake for over a hundred years—even a hundred and fifty years. Right here in this room. Alone."

Malfoy's nasty laughter faltered. His eyes seemed to focus inward and his face went blank. Apparently he had more faith in Ron's evidence against him than Ron did.

"Look around," Ginny said. "This is all you have. No house, no servants—nothing. What you're wearing is what you'll wear."

He shuddered involuntarily.

"Just this little space until you die. No wand. You'll never do magic again." She paused. It was cruel to say the next thing, but perhaps it would get through to him. "You'll hardly see your mother again."

His eyes glazed. His head dropped.

"Is that what you *want*?"

Malfoy put a hand over his face.

"Because if you don't help me now, Malfoy, that's what you'll *get*."

Malfoy went still as stone. For a moment, Ginny wondered if he had somehow been Stunned again. And then he slowly raised his head and pinned his swimming eyes on her.

"Are you saying..." He swallowed. "Are you saying that... if I *do* help you...there's a chance..."

She had him. Ginny walked as close to the barrier as she dared go. She knelt, picked up the ring, and met his eyes. "Tell me what it can do."

Malfoy was quiet. He looked at the ring for a long time and flexed the hand that had used to wear it. "What would it have to do to get me free?"

"I don't know," Ginny said honestly. "But if you tell me everything it does, then I can bargain for you."

Malfoy was quiet again. His eyes slid away from the ring in her hand and he shook his head.

"No?" Ginny said. "Fine. Then I'll give it to a curse breaker, and he'll sort out how to use it and we'll--"

Malfoy laughed, and the sound was harsh and cruel. "If you want to find yourself short another brother, then please, give it to the curse breaker. The less of you there are, the better."

Ginny tried to ignore the painful hatred she suddenly felt. He was so callous. He held nothing sacred, not even the dead.

"Who *can* use it then?" she demanded through clenched teeth.

Malfoy's eyes flitted to hers and the ugly light had come back into them. "I am your only option," he said.

Truth and satisfaction flooded the room. Pride. Ginny felt all of it, and wondered at its fierceness. Perhaps control over that ring was the one great talent his father had left him—perhaps it was a magic so Dark that only the Malfoys had been entrusted with the wielding of it.

"Then tell me what it does," she repeated. "You're risking nothing. If I bargain for you and lose, then you can just refuse to help. But if I bargain and win..."

Malfoy's eyes changed completely. There was hope in them. Desire.

"You might get your life back," Ginny finished. She hoped it would be enough.

"My *life* back," he echoed. He laughed again, but this time there was something pitiful in the sound. "No. I'm afraid that's not within your power." But he glanced at her, and then at the ring, and Ginny felt a shift in the air between them, like something sliding into place.

A decision.

"All right, then," Malfoy said faintly. "You want to know what it does?"

Ginny sat back on her heels and waited, her heart racing. He was actually going to tell her. Ron would never believe it.

"Could you secure my freedom if I..." Malfoy gave her a suspicious look, as if he were testing something. "If I were willing to come back to Azkaban and control the Dementors again?"

"You mean you'd put things back to how they were?"

Malfoy nodded.

But he was holding something back—Ginny could feel it. She narrowed her eyes at him. "I don't know. That's not very much, is it? Is that the most you can do?" she pressed.

Malfoy tilted his head. "Oh no," he said softly, and half-smiled. He seemed amused. "I could always destroy them, if you'd prefer."

It was a moment before Ginny realized that she could hear her own breath. It came in loud, ragged pulls that echoed in the cell. Her mouth was dry. "Destroy—what—the—"

"Dementors." Malfoy crossed his arms and legs and sat back against the wall, looking almost comfortable again.

Ginny didn't believe him. "You can't," she said flatly. "You can't do that."

"Can't I."

"But—but there's no—" Ginny spluttered. She stumbled to her feet and began to pace her half of the cell, her brain reeling. "Why would you have *bothered*?" she finally demanded, bewildered. "Why spend all that time at Azkaban—why work so hard when you didn't have to? If you could destroy them, then why not do it on the first day and spare yourself the trouble?" She stopped pacing and rounded on him. "Why?"

Malfoy smiled up at her. It was almost a real smile. "Come now," he said pleasantly, seeming to enjoy her reaction very much. "Surely the Healer can *sense* all my reasons."

But Ginny didn't have to sense anything; he had made all his reasons very clear. He had been killing Harry. Wearying her brother and herself. Wasting the Ministry's resources. Making her father look incompetent. It had been nothing but a game of petty vengeance tricks all the time—and all the time it could have been *over*. But Malfoy had been using Voldemort's leftover powers to indulge every nasty whim in his heart, like the spoiled bully he had always been.

"You're pathetic," she whispered.

He laughed. "Now, now," he chided lightly. "You'll have to show a bit more respect if you want me to *do* it. Oh—and there's a catch."

Ginny watched him and waited, disgusted.

"If I am freed for my services—given *complete* liberty, Weasley, not just a shorter sentence—then I will require the participation of several capable wizards to get the job done." He paused. "Note that I said *capable*. None of your family or your Mudblood friends will do."

Ginny wasn't sure she understood him. "I thought you were the only one who could use this ring?"

"I am." Malfoy smirked. "And the magic requires channeling. Once it is unleashed, I'll need others to do the work while I control the source of power."

"I've never heard of magic working like that."

Malfoy snorted. "Of course you haven't..." His eyes became slits again. "On second thought... why don't *you* participate?" He looked up at her with eyes full of malicious delight. "Oh yes. You and Potter and Granger. And your excellent brother. *All* of you."

Ginny was more frightened by his tone and his look than she wanted him to know. "I won't use that magic," she managed.

"Too noble?" Malfoy laughed again. He looked completely relaxed now, and perfectly confident. "Too high and mighty to use the power that is available to you?"

"That's *Dark* magic," Ginny said shakily. Perhaps this had been a bad idea. Perhaps they *shouldn't* let him help them. Not if they had to use spells that Voldemort had created. Not if they all had to channel something that was truly evil. And perhaps Malfoy was lying. Perhaps this was the biggest trap, the greatest trick of all.

"But it's fine for *me* to use it to achieve your ends?" Malfoy sighed as though put upon. "Honestly. The hypocrisy." He drummed dirty fingers on the ground, then tried to get to his feet again. This time, he was successful. He faced Ginny and pushed back his hair—and for a split second he looked like himself again—tall and lazy and cold, full of perfect arrogance.

"Well, why are you still here?" he asked, waving her towards the door. "Go on." He smirked. "Give the Secretary Privy my regards—I'm sure that *she* will see the value of this bargain better than the rest of you. And I'll... wait here, shall I?" He gave a short laugh, then walked to his rickety bed in the corner and lay down, shifting around on his back as if to find the best position in which to be Stunned.

Dazed, Ginny watched him settle. And then she closed her hand around his ring and walked out of the cell, her head so full of new information and new doubt that she could hardly think.

"Well?" Bill demanded, when she had shut the door.

"Do you need me to take that?" Moody asked, extending his hand.

"No, you can... you can go and Stun him." Ginny looked from Moody to Bill, and then down at the ring in her hand. "And then I think we should go to the Ministry. Right now."

A/N: Enormous thanks to Jedi B, Mistress of Malfoy, for channeling Draco for the sake of yet another scene. At least half his dialogue here belongs to her.

Arabella just watched "The Ring" and now wishes that this chapter wasn't titled that. She is shuddering right now.

This chapter was beta read by the following impossibly cool and incredibly lovely international super spies: Cap'n Kathy, Caroline, CoKerry, Firelox (who is here with us and would like everyone to know that with just a few more margaritas, she could think Draco was really hot) and Moey. We're deeply indebted to them for their continuing time and effort.

A/N II: Thanks to JEC for reading this story so closely, and for pointing out that Ginny's lack of pay would render the contract null and void.

A/N III: Mordor. Heh heh.

The Prisoners of Azkaban

“So there’s *no way* of telling who drank that portion of the Polyjuice Potion?” Ron searched through a haphazard stack of papers, all of which were eyewitness accounts of the battle on the Hogwarts lawns. He scanned his wand over each one, looking for his own name.

“No way at all,” Sirius replied from behind a scroll of parchment, which had just come up from the M.L.E.S. “They’ve done every spell they can think of to track who touched that jar last, but no trace of evidence was left.”

“Course it wasn’t,” Ron muttered. It made him feel sick to think of Malfoy parading across the Hogwarts lawn in *his* body—opening the gates to the Death Eaters with *his* hands. “Are you the *only* one who saw me twice?” he demanded, exasperated. None of the other eyewitnesses had mentioned seeing his double down at the gates.

“Snape saw it,” Sirius said.

“That’s hardly helpful.”

“Well, he very rarely was.”

Ron snorted, though it had been a long time since he had really thought badly of Snape. Not for the first time, he wished that Snape were still around. It would have been helpful to have his word on this. But he wasn’t around, and there was no one’s word but Sirius’s, and now everyone thought he was even madder than before.

“All I can do is wait for Ginny to finish easing her conscience and start telling me what she knows,” Ron said, slamming shut the file he had been digging through. It wasn’t worth it. He’d been through it five times and there was nothing in it that was useful.

Sirius lowered the parchment to look at Ron. “Do you *really* think Ginny knows something?”

“Oh, I know she does.” Ron pointed his wand in irritation, bringing a file box flying from a distant corner towards his desk. It slammed to the floor, the lid came off, and several papers fluttered out. “Might as well go through all this,” he said, annoyed. “I doubt it’s anything much, but I’ve seen all the rest of it so many times I feel like it’s all burnt into my eyes, to be honest.”

“What’s in that one?”

“The files on that jeweler, Galfrid Thinstone.”

“I didn’t know you’d found anything.”

Ron hefted a few of them onto his desk. “Well, it wasn’t easy,” he said. “Thinstone disappeared with all his money about a month before Voldemort was defeated, and he left these files in his Gringotts vault.”

Sirius groaned. They both knew how long it took to get anything out of someone else’s vault at Gringotts. Legal orders didn’t mean much to the goblins.

“Is that everything he had?” Sirius asked.

“There’s practically a library of financial records, but from what I’ve seen so far, his receipts were unspecific. The date and the cost of each item are listed, but not what was actually purchased. And yeah, these are the only other papers.” Ron peered at the label of the first file in his hands. *Women’s Hair Ornamentation*, it read. He rolled his eyes.

“Well, is there a file on Malfoy, anyway?”

“No, he’s got it organized by jewelry type.” Ron flipped through the next few. They weren’t alphabetized at all—Mr. Doyle in the Archives would have had a field day reorganizing them. *Functional Ornamentation (Wand Cases, Watches, Locks)*, read one file. *Rings*, read another. Intrigued—he’d just purchased a ring, after all—he flipped open the file and studied the top page.

It was a beautiful drawing of an incredibly ornate, bluish-silver ring. The ring was detailed so completely that it almost looked real... it seemed to sparkle and flash. It was obviously meant for a

woman, though if the drawing was to scale, then the ring itself must have been huge—it would have covered the whole bottom half of Hermione's ring finger—and there must have been thirty diamonds in it. There were a few, disjointed notes jotted beside the picture. *Imbue white gold with tears of veela... Temper over purple flame...* And scrawled in the bottom corner of the paper were a few numbers—at first, Ron thought they were the date. Then his jaw dropped.

"People don't really spend *this much* on rings," he said in outrage.

Sirius laughed. "Of course they do," he said, in a tone that suggested that he might, perhaps, have once known a few such people.

Ron couldn't imagine it. "That's just—just pretentious," he spluttered. "Well, I'm glad Hermione doesn't think—"

He heard the words before he could stop them, panicked, and clamped his mouth shut. Hermione was going to kill him. She wanted her parents to know first—so badly that she had been putting an Invisibility Charm on her engagement ring every morning, so that no one else would see it. Ron had suggested that she just take it off, but Hermione said she never would, and even though Ron thought she was insane, he was incredibly touched.

"Hermione doesn't think what?" Sirius asked keenly, hunkering over his desk and looking across the office at him. "Hmm?"

Ron looked back down at the file and didn't answer. He closed the folder, put it aside, and looked at the next one. *Dangerous Objects*, said the label, and Ron felt a tiny surge of hope. Surely if Malfoy had purchased something from Galfrid Thinstone, it would be sketched somewhere in here. They might be able to match things up, though what good it would do, Ron wasn't sure. He opened the file and began to flip through the pages. They were all the same—sketches with notes jotted alongside them and prices scrawled in the corners.

"Interesting reading?" Sirius asked innocently.

Ron looked up at him. "Actually, yeah," he said. "It's a file on dangerous objects—do you have Malfoy's receipts over there?"

Sirius nodded and began to dig through his own mountainous stacks of parchment, but before he found anything, green light flared up in the office fireplace. Ron glanced over and saw his father's head, floating disembodied in the flames. Perhaps it was just the firelight, but his eyes seemed unusually bright.

"Hey, Dad."

"Ron, I need you in my office." His father's voice was tense. Excited. "Your sister is here. She's just come from Culparrat."

Ron stood so quickly that he banged his leg on the desk and let out a curse. "Be right there," he said. "See you, Sirius."

"Actually... Sirius." Arthur's eyes flickered to him and he seemed to be considering. "You really shouldn't be here," he pointed out.

Sirius bowed his head slightly. "I know."

"But... since you are..."

Sirius's head came up. His eyes glinted. "Yes?" he asked hopefully.

"Please come along with Ron."

Sirius jumped up with twice Ron's energy, and Arthur sighed.

"This doesn't mean you're off suspension," Arthur warned.

"No, no, I know—"

"I'm consulting you for your opinion only."

"Yes, I understand—"

"Good." Arthur nodded. "Then hurry, both of you." His head disappeared and the flames flickered out.

Ron and Sirius wasted no time in locking the office. They practically ran down the Ministry's polished corridors and Ron nearly crashed into Lawrence when they reached Arthur's door. Lawrence gave an indignant sort of squawk and leapt to the side.

"Sorry!" Ron said breathlessly, as he and Sirius ran into the office without bothering to wait for their announcement. They skidded to a halt and stood together, panting.

"We—hurried—" Ron said, looking around the room. Moody was there, and Bill, and Rose K. Brown. They all looked shocked and still.

And there, in the chair beside their father, was Ginny, looking extremely pale and confused. For some reason she was wearing sleek black gloves, and her right fist was clenched so tightly that Ron thought she must be very nervous—though about what, he couldn't imagine. She raised her head and met his eyes.

"You'll want to sit down," she said quietly. Her eyes shifted to Sirius. "You'll..." She shook her head. "You'll *need* to sit down."

Then it was bad news. Ron felt his heart drop like a stone into his stomach—Malfoy hadn't told her anything and she wasn't going to talk. This was going to take weeks, and she was going to force them to drag it out of her. He couldn't believe it. "Ginny," he began, feeling his irritation rise. "Just tell us if he—"

"Sit down, Ron," she repeated in the same quiet voice. "I already told everyone else the main thing, and you need to hear it."

Ron glanced at his father, who gave him a vigorous nod. He and Sirius both took chairs.

"All right," Ron said when he was comfortable. "Let's have it, then."

Ginny pressed her lips tightly together. And then she raised her clenched hand and opened it, palm up, revealing something golden. "Do you recognize this?" she asked, and placed it on their father's desk.

Ron leaned over and peered at it. "No," he began, and then an unwanted memory flashed into his brain. The gaudy shape. The curly M. "Yeah," he corrected angrily. "I recognize that piece of crap."

"So do I," Sirius reached out towards it. "That's Malfoy's ring—"

"Don't touch it." Ginny's voice was so sharp that Sirius recoiled. "Sorry," she said. "But it's cursed. That's why I've got these." She held up her gloved hands.

"Cursed!" Ron reached up and rubbed his temple. Of course it was cursed, he couldn't believe he hadn't thought about it before. He should have known from the way it had burnt into his skin—the way the wound had lasted far longer than just an ordinary cut. "It's a Dark object? No wonder it left such a mark."

"It doesn't just leave marks," Ginny said. "It..." Her eyes flitted to Sirius. "It can control things. It can control dragons and—" She licked her lips. Her eyes gleamed. "And Dementors."

Sirius started. His mouth fell open—he reached for the ring again—

"No." Ginny put her hand over it and took it back before Sirius could get to it. "You can't use it. None of us can. And that's—that's not all it can do."

"Well what *else*?" Sirius rasped. "Just *say* it."

Ginny nodded, not taking her eyes from him. "It can destroy them," she said very softly. "The Dementors."

The silence in the room was so thick that it hurt Ron's ears. He could hardly comprehend what Ginny had just said. Because she couldn't have said it—it couldn't be *true*. He dared a look at Sirius.

Sirius was bone white.

"It's true," Ginny whispered into the silence. "Think about it. If Voldemort was using them in his army, he'd have to be able to control them and dispose of them. It makes sense that he would entrust that sort of power to someone as horrible as Lucius Malfoy."

Out of the corner of his eye, Ron saw his father wince.

"It's all right, Dad," Ginny said softly.

Ron wasn't sure he believed what he was hearing. "It can destroy the Dementors," he repeated flatly. "That ring."

"Yes." Ginny looked straight at him. "It's so cursed I can't touch it. It's incredibly powerful. Ask Bill."

Ron met Bill's eyes and was shocked to see his eldest brother concurring with a slow nod. "It's the most power I've ever seen in such a small object," Bill said. "I can show you what I mean, if you like—Ginny, put the ring on the desk."

Ginny did, and Bill drew his wand. "*Aparecium*," he said clearly.

A small area around the ring began to glow—to pulsate. Ron leaned closer, and suddenly he could see that the glowing air was alive with something writhing—something sickening green and slimy black, like a tangle of snakes that had rotted in a sewer.

Ginny shuddered.

"What's causing it?" Ron demanded.

Bill shrugged. "I have no idea."

"Well can't you break it?" Ron asked. "It's a curse, isn't it?"

Bill shook his head. "Part of my job is knowing when I'm beaten," he said. "I can't break that without killing myself. Now, there are curse breakers with more experience—we might hand it over to someone else to try it."

"It doesn't matter if they *could* break it," Rose Brown said, "it would be useless to us without

whatever magic it holds." She was hugging her clipboard and staring at the ring, obviously repulsed.

"True." Bill flicked his wand and the snaking halo of light disappeared, making the ring appear innocent once more.

"But..." Ron had to get his thoughts in order; they were so jumbled up that he could hardly find the important ones. "But wait a minute... you said that none of us can use it anyway, didn't you?" He looked at Ginny, who nodded. "Then how is it useful to us?"

"It... can only be useful to us if we let Malfoy control it," Ginny said, sitting up straight and putting out her hands when Ron opened his mouth to protest. "No, just listen to me. Listen to the whole thing."

Ron sat back, his head already pounding. He didn't like where this was headed. At all. He wasn't about to give them permission to let Malfoy out of Culparrat for field trips to Azkaban, wearing a ring that was probably capable of killing everything in sight.

"Malfoy knows how to destroy the Dementors," Ginny said again. "But he's not willing to do it unless he can go free."

Something ugly and white-hot shot straight through Ron's head and into his gut. He didn't need to hear the rest. "No," he interrupted. "No. Not a chance. He could be lying, he could be—"

"Will you *listen*," Ginny took a deep breath and let it out. "Let's say he's lying. Fine. Then he goes to Azkaban, he fails to destroy the Dementors, and you put him right back in Culparrat where you *will* be able to keep him for life, because this ring is as good as an Unforgivable Curse. But if he doesn't fail—if he's telling the truth—then all this trouble with the Dementors will be over."

"And Malfoy will be out in the world again," Ron countered angrily, "bullying people with his money and threatening all of us whenever he gets the chance— *NO*."

"I'm not finished!" Ginny said. "Ron, Malfoy thinks you have solid evidence on him. He thinks this is his only way out, that's the only reason he's agreed to do it. As soon as he finds out that there's any *chance* he might get free another way, he'll never in a million years help us—we have to do this *now*."

Ron felt dizzy and sick. Malfoy had impersonated him. Malfoy had complained so loudly to his father about Hermione that Hermione's parents had been tortured nearly to death. Malfoy's father had been there when Percy had been murdered—he had tried to kill Ginny—he had tried to kill their dad—and now Ginny wanted to let him *go*? Every nasty comment, every vile gesture that Ron had ever had from Draco Malfoy filled his head and gave him a splitting headache.

"He can't destroy them," he muttered. "He's full of *crap*—he never would have done all that work if he had a way out of it, he never would have been a dragon rider if he didn't have to be."

"He didn't have to be. He volunteered," said Arthur quietly. "It was his choice to take that job. And he certainly didn't take it for financial reasons."

"Well then *why*?" Ron demanded, meeting his dad's gaze. "Just to be a right raging *bastard*?"

"To make me look bad, for one thing," Arthur said mildly. "Which, I'm afraid, was very successful. I don't expect to be made Minister again, with the way the Privy Counselors' debates have gone lately. Ever since we were forced to put more guards on the shoreline, I've been seen as very wasteful. So Malfoy had at least that on his agenda—Rose, when does the Privy Council expect to reach a decision?"

Rose fidgeted. "By the end of the month," she said.

Rage rose in Ron's heart. "How can you take it so *calmly*, Dad?" he nearly shouted. "Do you see what I mean about him—we can't let him out! He didn't just make you look bad, he's been stealing months of Charlie's life—and Harry's half-dead every time he gets home from one of his shifts—"

Ginny flinched.

"*If* all this is true, then Malfoy's been using that thing on *all* of us—" Ron pointed at the ring "—because he could have done something useful with it *months* ago!"

"Well, he's willing to do it now," Ginny began.

"In exchange for his freedom? Oh, I don't think so." Ron got out of his chair. He could no longer bear to sit still—he wanted to pace. He wanted to *punch*. "I think we ought to force him to use it. Put him under Imperius, make him do what we need him to do and then throw him straight back in prison where he belongs." Ron saw something like horror on Bill's face, but he didn't care. He *hated* Malfoy, and there were reasons for his hatred. "Why should I care about treating him justly? Why, after the way he's treated everyone else in the world? Why should he be allowed to force us into a position where we have to make this choice? We're giving him all the power, and I won't do it! *I won't do it!*"

Ron stood, panting and furious, not sure where to look. Everyone was watching him in varying degrees of pity and shock, and he couldn't handle any of it.

"Do you even *know* what his dad was doing?" Ron asked jerkily, in the silence. "Putting maiden-hair root into Muggle cosmetics. Hundreds of thousands of lipsticks and powders are full of it. Do you know what maidenhair root does?"

Rose Brown's eyes widened. Her mouth opened. "It... causes infertility," she said faintly.

"In Muggles. To weed down the numbers." Ron felt the familiar wrench in his stomach that always accompanied such sick ideas. "The company that does it will *belong* to Malfoy if we let him out. And so will a dozen others that do similar things."

Even Moody looked disgusted, though there was no surprise on his face. He cracked the weathered knuckles of one hand against the leathery palm of the other, as if preparing to hit someone hard.

"I know you all think I'm vindictive." Ron stared down at Ginny. "I know you think I'm mad—"

"No, Ron," Ginny cut in. "I don't."

Ron ignored her. "I know you're thinking, well, Malfoy's just one person, how bad can it really be if we—"

"*Voldemort* was just one person." Ginny's voice was nearly inaudible. "And to tell the truth, Malfoy's just as..."

They all looked at her.

"I used to think that Malfoy could never become what Tom Riddle became," Ginny said, her voice shaking. "But after today, I don't know. I just don't know. I think he's capable of real brutality. Part of me thinks it would be very wrong to let him out. Part of me thinks the idea of putting him under Imperius is a good one."

Ron was so surprised to hear her on his side that he couldn't think of a word to say.

"But I don't think I could do it," she said. "I don't want to be like Riddle, or Malfoy, or any of them. I just can't make myself want him in prison that badly. I won't give up that piece of myself, and Ron, you shouldn't either. Not for Malfoy. Not *you*."

Ron was struck silent.

"I hate him too," Ginny said. "If you knew half of what he said to me today..." She stopped. "But I don't want to see you sinking to his level. He doesn't deserve justice, but you deserve your self-respect, and you know you wouldn't have it anymore if you did something like that. Imagine what Dumbledore would say—imagine what Hermione would think."

Ron's heart jumped. Hermione. He'd hardly thought about her for an hour. It was the longest he'd gone without her face in his mind for years. It occurred to him with sudden force just how wrapped up he'd been in Malfoy—how many hours he'd spent on a single case when there were others waiting for him. How much of his energy had gone into retaliation when he had a life outside it—when he had someone amazing who wanted to *marry* him. He felt suddenly rather cold.

"I don't mean to lecture, either," Ginny said. "I'm really confused about this because—because there's still a catch."

Arthur was already looking at her. "What catch?" he asked gently.

"Malfoy says the ring is just the source of power," Ginny replied. She was paler than ever and her freckles stood out darkly against her skin. "And that he'll have to control it while we all use what it unleashes in order to destroy the Dementors. So we'd... have to use *Voldemort's* magic. We'd have to channel it ourselves."

"Channel it?" Bill breathed. "Is he joking?"

"No." Ginny gave a weak laugh. "I'm sure he isn't. He asked for us specifically. Us and Harry and Hermione. He... he thinks it's funny to see us forced to use Dark magic."

Moody snorted loudly. "So he's one of the truly petty bastards, is he?" he muttered. "Twisted as tree roots. Seen it before. Worst of the lot, men like that. Taking their personal problems out on the world like little children—that's where we get our Grindelwalds and *Voldemorts*—you mark my words. If we let him out, we'll have another Dark Lord before my life's over."

"That's conjecture," Rose said, but she sounded shaken. "The *fact* is that if we *don't* let him out, we'll be saddled with the Dementors forever. And I don't want that for this Ministry." She looked down at her clipboard. "Or for those riders," she added quietly.

"So which is it, then?" Ron asked, and suddenly he wasn't sure of the answer. "Which is worse? Malfoy or the Dementors?" He met Bill's eyes. Ginny's. His father's.

"I want to kill them."

Ron nearly came out of his skin. He whirled towards the sound of the voice—the rasping, mad-dened voice that he had not heard since the end of his third year. In the Shrieking Shack.

Sirius's was gripping the arms of his chair so tightly that his fingers seemed to Ron to be nothing but bone. Like skeleton hands. He was pale as death and his eyes were alight with something

not-quite human.

"Let *me* kill them, Arthur."

That voice again. Ron was seriously unnerved—he took a step away from Sirius's chair and glanced uncomfortably at Ginny. But she wasn't watching him; her eyes were on Sirius and she looked as afraid as Ron felt.

"Sirius," Arthur began, very gently.

"Let Malfoy free." Sirius was breathing quickly and color was now rising in his face. He looked feverish. "Let him use that ring—I'll channel Dark magic, I don't care, I've had worse, and I *want* to do it."

Moody shifted against the wall where he stood, and crossed his arms. "You're making this personal, Black," he said.

Sirius's head swung towards Moody and Ron couldn't see his face. But he knew it must have been terrifying, because even Moody looked somewhat cowed.

"*Twelve years*," was all Sirius managed. And then he slumped back in his chair like someone who had just been released from a trance. He put a hand to his eyes and seemed to be trying to regulate his breathing. "If they can be destroyed," he said, "then there is no question here. If those *creatures* can be destroyed, then we must take the opportunity. Dark Lords are human—they come and go. If Malfoy's going to stay on his father's path, we'll eventually catch up with him again. I've no doubt about that. But if we lose this chance..." He uncovered his eyes and pinned them on Arthur. "If we lose this chance, I'll lose my mind," he said simply. "That's not an exaggeration. Let Malfoy go, Arthur—this is *worth it*."

It was the first exception Sirius had made in all the months they'd worked together, and Ron wasn't sure how he felt. He *didn't* want Malfoy to get out of prison, but...

Ron grimaced. He didn't want to own it, even to himself. But Sirius had a point.

"Wait, Sirius," Rose said. Her voice was still shaking, but she looked quite determined; she gave her clipboard a brisk tap with her quill. "There are still several things to work out before we take this risk."

"For *example*?"

Rose hesitated, then met Sirius's stare with one of her own. Perhaps it wasn't quite as fierce, but she managed to keep it up, and Ron was impressed. "For example," she said, her tone becoming more businesslike, "why is it that only Malfoy can do this magic? Why are we so dependent on him? Do you know, Ginny?"

"I..." Ginny shrugged. "I suppose it's just because he's the one who knows the spells that can focus the curse. I mean, it's not a talent—this isn't some *gift* he has." She laughed, and the sound was unusually harsh. "He's just a bully with a toy."

"And no one else knows the same spells?" Rose went on. "No one else learned those curses? I find it hard to believe that Voldemort would only give that information to Lucius Malfoy."

"I don't," Moody said. "In my experience that's *precisely* how Voldemort operated. No two Death Eaters ever had the same information, and the higher up they were, the more isolated the information was. That way, if one of them was caught, the rest of his secrets weren't compromised. The only Dark spell they all seemed to know was the one that sent up the Dark Mark. Every one of them could do that."

"That and the Unforgivables," Ron muttered. He didn't meet Ginny's glance.

"Then can't we somehow discover the necessary words?" Rose asked. "Between curse breakers and Thinkers and spell crafters, there has to be someone that can reveal to us how this ring is used."

"It doesn't work that way," Bill sighed. "I wish it did. We could guess the incantation, of course—but how many people would it kill, if we were wrong? You *saw* the curse that's sitting in that ring—we have absolutely no room for error."

"We could use Veritaserum," Rose interrupted. "Get the spell out of him that way."

"We could. But words alone aren't enough to make magic," said Arthur. "We'd need him to *teach* it to us, and Veritaserum isn't that powerful."

"Well, damn it!" Rose said, slapping her quill against her clipboard angrily.

Everyone stared at her.

"This is ridiculous!" she said, not seeming to notice that she'd violated her usual self-restraint. "Every one of us in this room is more powerful than Draco Malfoy, there *has* to be a way for us to do this without him!" She looked at Arthur. "What about Harry?"

Ginny drew back in her chair. "What *about* Harry?"

"He's resisted magic worse than this, he might be able to—"

"NO," said Ron, Ginny, Sirius and Arthur together.

"Leave Harry out of it," Ginny continued hotly. "In this he's just a dragon rider like the rest of them. Like Mick. We *won't* make this his burden—*forget* it. He's done *enough*."

"Calm down, Ginny." Their father's voice was very quiet. "It's all right. That's not about to happen."

Ginny grew very pink, as if she'd just realized where she was. But she closed her mouth and nodded.

"I think it's clear," Sirius said, biting off every word, "that we need Malfoy for this. That does *not* mean he is the one in control." He turned and, to Ron's immense disquiet, looked right up at him. "What it means is that we will have to use him. And I am not opposed to using him." He gave a smile so feral that Ron could have sworn he saw fangs. "Are *you*?"

Put in that light, Ron couldn't say that he was.

"But there's more to think about," Rose cut in. "That ring didn't get cursed by itself—who made it, Ginny? Was it Lucius?"

Ginny let out a breath. "Malfoy didn't really say..." She frowned. "He asked me if... no, wait. I asked *him* if the power in it was the Imperius Curse, and then he said something about how the Dark Lord used magic that my kind couldn't name or understand."

Rose lifted her eyebrows. "Voldemort made it?" she said dubiously. "That doesn't make sense. There's an *M* etched on it."

"But if it was specifically *for* Malfoy," Ginny began, "then he might have—"

"Done a little engraving?" Moody snorted. "No, Rose is on to something. Voldemort didn't make that ring."

Ron shot out of his chair, excitement coursing through him. "Or else he *did*, and whoever engraved it was *skilled* with dangerous objects—like Malfoy's jeweler—his files are in our office, there are sketches—" Ron couldn't speak in rational sentences. He went to the door, drew his wand and pointed it down the corridor. "*Accio Dangerous Objects File!*" he shouted, so loudly that Lawrence jumped and gave him a dirty look. "*Acco Rings File!*" he added, for good measure.

There were a few minutes of very painful anticipation before the files came zooming down the corridor, narrowly missing people as they flew. Ron caught them in midair and hurried back into his father's office. He handed the *Rings* file to Sirius.

"Look for a sketch of that ring," he said, and both of them began hurriedly to flip through pages. Ron hardly noticed the sketch of the gold chain that served as a precaution against burglars, hexed to strangle whoever stole it. He flipped right past the earrings that recorded conversations, and he barely saw the twin bracelets that doubled as handcuffs.

"Got it," Sirius said, brandishing an oversized rectangle of parchment in the air. Ron pulled his chair closer, and everyone else gathered around them and stared down at it. There was a heavy pause in which they all studied the sketch and read the notes beside it. As he read, Ron felt as though his lungs were constricting.

Ginny was the first to speak. "That's... why I... can't touch it..." she managed. She was holding her stomach.

Ron felt sick. Beside the sketch of the ring's face, onto which Thinstone had drawn the painstakingly elaborate *M*, there was a far more extensive set of notes.

- *Curse object*
- *Do not engrave more deeply than 1/4 cm or mortal peril*
- *Basilisk venom at core (note—venom unusual core, uncontainable element, likely to have bled into metal, CAUTION)*
- *Tempering/Cursing process unknown*
- *Purified in boiling Basilisk's blood*
- *DO NOT USE BARE HANDS*

Ginny returned to her chair looking white and shaken; their father followed, sitting beside her and putting his hand on her arm.

"Venom at the *core*," Rose murmured. "So it's... like a wand."

"But with limited power." Bill squinted at the picture for a moment, then sighed, pulled his glasses out of his pocket and fitted them to his face. "And with other curses placed on it, apparently—probably to stop people who aren't supposed to be using it—"

"Like us," said Rose.

"From trying to do so," Bill finished. "Anyway, venom's not just an uncontainable core. It's an illegal and unstable one."

"You know..." Rose said slowly, "it's a morbid thought. But if Lucius Malfoy was wearing this ring when he died, then I suppose his son just... took it off his body."

There was a collective shudder.

"I know it's... practical not to bury valuables ..." Rose trailed off.

"Malfoy should stay in prison," Ron said flatly. He felt Sirius's eyes bore into him, but he couldn't help the way he felt. It seemed clear that they were going to let Malfoy off—they were going to let him walk right out of Culparrat even though they now had real *evidence* on him—and Ron wasn't sure he'd ever really reconcile himself to it.

"If we're honestly considering setting Malfoy free, then it can't be absolute freedom," Rose said. She looked nauseated.

"He said it would have to be," Ginny said dully.

"No." Rose laughed. "He'll have to reconsider. He has to know that bargains work both ways. There *will* be a probation period, and during it I want the M.L.E.S. to monitor his property. I want wards against Dark magic placed around his manor. I want Gringotts to keep authorities apprised of every financial transaction Malfoy makes. I want those companies of his dismantled, and I want him fined. *Heavily* fined." She humphed. "He'll have to make up for the money we've wasted all year."

"He'll never do all that—" Ginny began.

"Oh *won't* he." Rose smiled. "A Slytherin maxim for you, Ginny—we know a deal when we see one. And this is more than a deal. Malfoy should never get out of prison, and if he's willing to do something to help us then he bloody well *knows* it. A few minor stipulations placed on his freedom won't stop him wanting it." She looked coolly satisfied. "Trust me."

For the first time in his life, Ron thought he saw the value of having a Slytherin around. "How long can we make the probation period?" he asked.

"Standard practice is a year, isn't it?" Rose answered.

"Ten years then," Ron said. "Minimum."

Everyone was quiet for a moment, and then, one by one, they nodded.

"But we still..." Ginny said after a moment. "We still have to be the ones who *do* it. Malfoy wants *us* to participate in that spell. Me and Ron and Harry and Hermione—he said several capable wizards would be needed, so I expect we're not enough. But he does want us."

Silence followed this reminder, and Ron's heart beat hard and fast. Harry would be all right, and Ginny wasn't bad in a scrimmage—but Hermione wasn't a very good flyer.

"I'll participate," said Arthur, looking around the room at all of them.

"No, Dad—" Bill started.

"If any of my children plan to be up there, then I will be there with them."

Ron felt a surge of terrible fear. His dad *was* a good flyer, but... he was older. And he wasn't in practice.

"I suppose Mick will volunteer," Rose said quietly. She looked unhappy about it.

"And me," said Bill. "And Charlie, I'm sure."

Moody heaved a rough sort of sigh. "Can't balance too well on a broom," he said, thumping his wooden leg on the office floor. "Don't suppose someone would strap me onto one?"

Ron snickered involuntarily and many eyes turned on him, including one that rolled in a most abnormal manner. He pressed his mouth shut and looked down at the tops of his shoes, trying to remember that the situation was very serious. But it was hard going when, in his head, he was entertaining the absurd image of his dad binding Mad-Eye Moody to a broom and sending him wobbling out over the sea.

"Well, that's several of us," Ginny said, and Ron was grateful that everyone's eyes turned on her instead. "And we're all capable. That's all Malfoy said he needed. So then..." She looked at their dad. "Is that it? Is this what we're going to do?"

Arthur considered her for a moment, his eyes very grave. And then he folded his hands on his desk and gazed at them for a long time. Finally, he opened his mouth. "Yes," he said. "I believe..." He seemed to be measuring his words very carefully. "I believe it's the best choice, not only for the Ministry and for the people we love who are being affected, but for the wizarding world. Muggles may not be able to see Dementors or suffer them as we do—and I'm glad for them. But we *can*." He unfolded his hands and used one to rub his temples. "And I'm worried for the people in Stornoway—I'm worried about every witch and wizard in Britain. If the Dementors' hunger continues to grow,

they may yet find a way around the current system. If they do, then our whole world is at risk."

Ron remembered how Harry had looked at the beginning of last summer, when they had heard about that poor witch who had lost her soul. Her little boy had lost his mother—her husband had lost his wife. Ron put himself in the man's shoes and knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that to destroy the Dementors was the most important thing. Even if it meant giving up on something else that, to Ron, felt almost equally important.

"I admit I have reservations about offering Draco Malfoy a bargaining opportunity that we haven't offered to anyone else, but this is... a very unusual situation." Arthur looked around at each of them and his eyes were pale and tired, but resolute. "I'm afraid that it may have a detrimental impact on the rest of the trials. But I hope that it can be kept quietly among ourselves."

Ginny gave their father a funny look.

He continued. "Though I doubt it. I won't lay this burden on the shoulders of just a few people, for one thing. Other wizards and witches will have to be involved..." He absently scratched his head. "But until the necessary papers are signed, we will continue as we are. And as soon as he has made the agreement, we will... arrange ourselves as he instructs." Arthur's lips twisted in something like a smile. "I'm sure he'll enjoy that," he said very faintly.

Ginny looked pensively at the ring on the desk. "Then... who should tell Malfoy what he's going to have to agree to?" she asked.

No one answered. Ron knew that he had no desire to see Malfoy and to tell him that he, for all intents and purposes, had won what he wanted. He had found a way, as usual, to bully himself out of a situation. Ron knew he wouldn't be able to pass along the information calmly. Sirius might have been able to, but Sirius was suspended—not that that seemed to matter anymore.

"I'll tell him," Rose said suddenly. She put her clipboard on Arthur's desk and smoothed a hand over her hair. "I'll go whenever you're willing to take me," she said to Moody. "I'd like to negotiate with him while this is all fresh in my mind, and once he's agreed to a few limitations, we can draw up a contract."

Ginny smiled slightly. "You know," she said to Rose, "it's funny. He *said* you'd be the one who'd appreciate the bargain. He said to give you his regards, actually."

"Did he. How interesting." Rose gave a catlike smile. "What a lot of House faith he has."

"Well!" Moody clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "This should be entertaining. Come along, Privy Brown. We can wake him now, if you like—it's not as if he's got a busy schedule." He snorted and turned towards the Minister's desk. "Arthur," he said, with a respectful nod of his head, and then he thunked his way out of the office with Rose right behind him.

"You forgot this," Arthur called after her, holding up her clipboard.

Rose glanced over her shoulder and smirked. "Thanks, Arthur. But I only need that thing when I'm trying to be fair."

The door closed behind them with a snap.

"She's very young," said Arthur, his eyes on the door. "Very young. But I have faith that she will make an excellent Minister, if she chooses the right people to surround her."

No one seemed to know what to say. Ron wanted to argue—to say that she *wouldn't* be Minister. But he wasn't sure that he was right.

"Are you all right, Sirius?"

Sirius looked up at Arthur with haunted eyes. "I will be," he said hoarsely. "*Soon*."

Arthur nodded. "Ginny? Is there anything more you would like me to know about what went on at Culparrat?"

Ginny sighed a little, and shook her head. "Nothing important," she said. "Just a lot of insults."

Ron thought that he probably could have recited them.

"Bill? Where do you suggest we put this ring?"

Bill shrugged. "It seems to be harmless enough unless it's being used directly—or unless it's touching Ginny. Just keep it in a safe."

"Gringotts, then," said Arthur, sweeping the ring into his hand and pocketing it. "Let's go now." He rose, and his gaze fell on Ron.

Ron looked up. He met his father's eyes and wasn't sure what to make of the look in them.

"I know how difficult this is for you," Arthur said, searching his face. "I remember when they let Lucius Malfoy off. I'd just been promoted to my old position at the time, and I had started going on the raids, and I *knew* what he was, and I wanted..."

Ron waited.

"I wanted to hunt him down and finish him off." Arthur ran a hand through what was left of his hair. "I remember it like it was yesterday. The things he'd said. The things he'd *done*. It was beyond

me, how anyone could bargain with a man like that, and in that case, I still believe that they were *wrong*." His eyes were fierce. Despairing. "I used to rage to your mother every night, behind closed doors so that Bill and Charlie wouldn't know how helpless I felt. I didn't want them to know that their father couldn't make things right."

Bill shifted his feet, shoved his hands in his pockets and looked down at the floor.

Ron knew why. It was strange to hear all this. He felt as if a door had been opened to him and he had unexpectedly walked into a world where his father was just a regular person. Just a man with frustrations of his own—not a father at all. And it wasn't that Ron hadn't seen those frustrations before, but it was very different to hear them said like this.

"And there you and Ginny were, just babies. Your mother always had one or both of you crawling on her whenever I ranted." Some of the old anger went out of Arthur's face as he remembered it. "I'd be saying, Molly, I hate that man. I know what you must think of me, but I honestly wish him dead. They've given him back everything and he deserves *nothing*."

He could have been speaking for Ron.

"And your mother would nod and tell me I wasn't horrible at all, and then she'd hold the two of you up to me one by one and say, that's enough of Lucius Malfoy for now, Arthur. Your children have missed you all day, give them a kiss."

Ron saw Ginny look down. He heard her snuffle. And suddenly, he had to look down too.

"The point I'm trying to make," Arthur said, coming around his desk and putting a hand on Ron's shoulder, "is that you have every right to be as angry and frustrated as you are. He's a sick young man who really ought to be punished—severely. But Ron, there are more important things in life to concentrate on, and he has none of them. While you have *all* of them. Just as I did."

Ron clenched his teeth and blinked his eyes. He couldn't look up. He *would not* snuffle.

His father ruffled his hair. "Have a good afternoon," he said gently. "Take some time to yourself, and say hello to Hermione for me. We haven't seen enough of her lately—we haven't even had a chance to talk to her about her parents. Your mother wants you both over for dinner to celebrate—and you, Ginny."

Keeping his eyes on his knees, Ron nodded. He felt his father's hand slip off his hair, and heard him and Bill walk to the door and pause.

"Would you come, Sirius?" Arthur asked. "I'd like to discuss a few things with you."

Out of the corner of his eye, Ron saw Sirius rise and leave the office with his father and eldest brother. He was alone in the office with Ginny, and it was safe to look up now—though when he did so, he wished he hadn't.

She was gazing at him with very wet eyes and pulling off her leather gloves with fingers that seemed to want them gone. "Sorry I fought with you," she managed, throwing the gloves onto the desk. "I don't think you're vindictive. Please don't think I meant it. I just said it because I was angry. You know that, don't you?"

Ron wanted to tell her that he didn't really think she was unprofessional either, but he wasn't sure he trusted his voice. So he stood instead and beckoned for her, and opened his arms a bit.

Ginny stood, still sniffling, and walked straight into them. She gave him a tight, wordless hug.

The sun filtered in around them through the giant Ministry windows, bathing them in shafts of light full of dust. The Dementors would vanish, but Malfoy would go free. And they would have to *help* him. They'd have to channel the kind of Darkness they had fought against in order that Malfoy might walk back into his old life and continue to live it in a terrible way that might one day have terrible consequences.

But Ron knew his father was right—he *did* have the important things. He had Hermione's incredible love—he had Harry's unfathomable friendship—he had a family who supported him in everything, and he would always have those people. Always. No matter what terrible consequences came, no matter what else was lost along the way. And if they had to fight again, then they would stand together and do it. He knew it without question; he could not imagine it any other way.

A life empty of *that*, Ron thought suddenly, would be the worst possible punishment.

He hugged Ginny tighter for a moment, then let her go. "Should we go and tell Hermione and Harry?" he asked.

Ginny checked her watch. "They'll be home between four and five, and it's only one. I... sort of want to visit Mum." She gave him a hopeful look. "Want to come with me?"

"Yeah, all right," Ron said. He had a sudden urge to see his mother too. "Let's surprise her." He tucked Ginny's arm into his. Together they left the Ministry of Magic and Apparated home.

Harry stood in front of his locker in the equipment tent, staring at his dragon riding gear and wondering what, if anything, would be useful to him. It was good gear. Flame-proof. It had kept him from getting torched on several occasions, and it had a heavy strength to it that had grown comfortable to him after many months of extended wear. His eyes scanned the thick, black gloves... the jacket with all its safety straps, harness loops and pocket zippers... the safety goggles that kept out heat and smoke as well as fire. He supposed he didn't need any of it today. They weren't going to be on dragons, for this; they were going to be on brooms. And Harry knew that he was most comfortable on a broom when he was in plain robes, just flying. He'd be fine without all this.

And anyway, none of it would protect him against whatever Malfoy was planning.

He slowly shut his locker, then turned, leaned against it, and fingered his wand as he looked around the room. He didn't know what to expect, and neither did anyone else. Every expression was one of muted terror, but not one person had refused to participate.

Harry still couldn't believe that Ron had explained the situation so calmly. Malfoy-free. All of them-bound to use Dark magic. The Dementors *destroyed*.

The last part was the only bit that Harry wasn't sure he believed. He knew a contract had been signed that guaranteed Malfoy his freedom if he followed through on his word—that much was certain. He knew also that every person in this tent—and several who weren't in it—were going to fly out over Azkaban and do the sort of magic that had only worked *against* them in the past, in an attempt to see the Dementors destroyed forever. Or so Malfoy had promised.

But what did Malfoy *really* intend to do?

A vision of all of them falling from the sky, limp and helpless, came into Harry's mind unbidden—he pushed it down as hard as he could. But it rose again, stronger and more merciless, warning him that Malfoy could not be trusted. That for all they knew, they were being lured to their collective death.

"Do we need those?" Harry asked vaguely, as Mick pulled on his own gloves.

"I do." Mick flexed both hands. "It's all about getting a nice, firm grip, Harry." He flashed Harry a weak grin that didn't last long, and then turned back to his own locker looking less than confident.

Lisa tucked her hair up into her helmet. Burke pulled on his inflammable jacket—perhaps he thought it would help. Even Charlie was pulling on gloves, although Harry supposed that Charlie, like Mick, was so used to those that he might actually fly better with them by now.

Viktor Krum shut his locker without taking any of his gear out of it except his broom. "I fly better in robes," he muttered. "I vill... be outside." Looking grim, he pushed the tent flaps open and disappeared.

"I don't see how this goes on." Hermione had taken Cho's jacket out of her locker and was trying to work out where the armholes were. "Does it buckle around the back or something?"

Cho, who apparently didn't want her gear, helped Hermione into the jacket.

Ron watched them, pale as a ghost. He met Harry's eyes, and Harry knew what he was thinking; Hermione was a terrible flyer. Neither of them wanted her up there for this.

"How about a hand for your old dad, Ginny?" said Arthur. Ginny had just come into the tent, and he was struggling with one of the jackets in much the same way as Hermione had been.

"You won't need it," Ginny said quietly. "It won't help, Dad. It's just for fire." She came and stood beside Harry. Harry felt her hand slip into his and he gripped it. He saw Arthur's eyes flicker towards them, but he couldn't let her go. He wondered if this was the last time he was going to touch her, and suddenly the whole year seemed like a colossal waste of time. They had been given just one year of peace between battles, and they hadn't used it. Just as they had finally come together, they were being ripped apart. None of them had any idea what they were going to have to do—they were going to have to trust Malfoy to show them everything.

"Ow," Ginny whispered.

Harry relaxed his grip on her fingers. But just a little.

Seconds later, Viktor came back into the tent. "Ve are all expected outside by seven o'clock," he said shortly, and disappeared again. Arthur squared his shoulders, took up his broom, and left the tent. Charlie, Cho and Mick followed him right away, and Burke and Lisa were right behind them. Hermione took a little while longer—she was still fussing with the straps and buckles on her jacket when Ron, still very pale and carrying both their brooms, guided her out.

Harry hesitated, still holding fast to Ginny's hand. Leaving the tent meant joining the fight. And though he knew that he was going to do it, he had never been so reluctant to take the risk. It was ridiculous to risk everyone and everything, all because of one person. It was like Voldemort all over again, only this was almost worse, because it felt paltry. This did not feel like a noble fight. It might have, if Harry had been able to believe that Malfoy was really going to keep his word—it *would* be

worth a fight to be rid of the Dementors—but he had no reason to believe that it was really going to happen. If Malfoy was up to something more than he was letting on, then they were all in danger, and to die at his hands would make a mockery of all their previous efforts to survive.

“Let’s go, Harry.”

He looked at Ginny’s face. It was as pale as Ron’s, but very determined, and her eyes were bright and clear. Full of strength. Life. Harry felt something inside him snap.

“They’ll be waiting for us,” she said gently.

Harry knew it. But just for the moment, he didn’t care. “Listen,” he said urgently, turning Ginny towards him and grabbing her other hand as well. “You *can’t* get hurt, do you understand me?”

“Then you can’t either,” she said swiftly, her eyes growing instantly brighter and her determination seeming to falter. “Please—*you can’t*.”

He wouldn’t. He took her face between his hands and kissed her while there was still a chance. The world outside slid out of focus and she was all there was.

Was this what it had been like for his parents? How many battles had there been? How many times had they almost died before they had been killed—how often had they kissed and wondered if it was the last time? It was almost worse this way, Harry thought. He had been afraid before, but he had always been ready to die—ready to sacrifice whatever was necessary in order to make things come out right. But now he wasn’t willing. Now he had Ginny Weasley in his arms—her mouth moved on his; her heart beat near his; her hands fluttered to his chest and clutched his robes, making him hot and cold all over. It was far worse to have something to come back to. It made Harry want to come *back*.

“No,” she muttered suddenly, breaking away. “No. This isn’t the last time—this *isn’t* all we get. We’re going to be all right.” She looked right at him, breathing hard. “And so is everyone else. He’s not taking this from any of us.”

Harry wanted her to be right.

“Get your broom, Harry,” she said, letting him go and grabbing her own from her old locker.

He obeyed. They walked out of the tent and into the rising morning light where at least a hundred people were walking slowly towards the empty enclosure where Mordor had used to be—where Arthur and Rose now stood with Mad-Eye Moody and Sirius, who was holding a very small pouch. The three of them seemed to be standing on an elevated platform, though Harry couldn’t see it through the throng, which was made up of many people he had expected to see and a few he hadn’t, most of them gripping their brooms. The twins were there with Angelina, all looking resolute. There was Penelope... Amos Diggory... Bill and Fleur... Remus, who was standing very near the platform... there was Joe Cooper, who had taken over for Malfoy... Harry even spotted Mrs. Weasley, and he was sure he’d never seen her look so ill. The rest of the crowd was made up of guards, Aurors and members of the M.L.E.S.—Seamus Finnigan stood with a crowd of his fellow Enforcers, and Lavender stood beside him, as sober-eyed as Harry had ever seen her.

Harry couldn’t believe that it really took this many intelligent people to deal with Malfoy. It was ludicrous.

“Is everyone here?” asked Rose, in a nervous, amplified voice, as Harry and Ginny approached the edge of the crowd. It was a crowd composed entirely of Ministry officials and powerful witches and wizards who had made great differences in the war, and yet many pairs of eyes traveled over him with unconcealed interest. Harry found it strange that, in a group such as this, anyone could still think he was worth staring at. He and Ginny slid into place beside Ron and Hermione, and none of them spoke as they waited for information.

Rose gestured for silence from the rest of the crowd. “Thank you—all of you—for coming. My name is Rose K. Brown, I am the Secretary Privy to the Council on Magical Matters, and I know that many of you have been summoned here today, or have volunteered yourselves, without knowing exactly what you’re getting into. I’m sorry we couldn’t be clearer before this. Please listen closely.”

Rose consulted her clipboard and took a deep breath.

“I’m sure you’re all aware of the situation with the Dementors. It’s a perilous situation in many ways. It’s very hazardous for the dragon riders of the Permanent Azkaban Patrol, who have, up to recently, been entirely responsible for containing the Dementors in Azkaban. It’s a drain on the resources of the Ministry of Magic, due to the cost of keeping this dragon camp open, paying the salaries of each member of the P.A.P., and in spending valuable time in discussion and debate over what ought to be done to remedy this. Finally, and most importantly, it’s a matter of life and death to every witch and wizard in Britain—and the world. If the Dementors are not contained, if they are free to wander land and sea, then they are free to take the souls of whomever they meet. Up to this point, however, the dragon riders have been able to contain the Dementors. Since its creation, the P.A.P. has been one-hundred-percent effectual in preventing fatal accidents.

"Recently, things have taken a sharp turn for the worse. The members of the Permanent Azkaban Patrol are no longer able to contain the Dementors alone. If you walked down the shoreline to get here, then you saw dozens of guards in place, and you probably also saw that every one of them is necessary—the Dementors can now escape in large groups and at high speeds and are extremely dangerous. You may have seen them gliding towards the shore.

"You may be asking yourselves how it's possible for the situation to have declined so quickly. At first, we didn't know ourselves. But a week ago, information became available to us that we will now share with all of you.

"On the first of April, Draco Malfoy was arrested under suspicion of war crimes and taken to Culparrat prison to await trial. At that time, he was a member of the P.A.P. and was one of its most efficient dragon riders. The loss of him as part of the flight team resulted in a dramatic shift in the behavior of the Dementors. Over a period of just a few days, the Dementors went from well contained to out-of-control. It was such a violent shift that it required the placement of dozens of guards and several Aurors, who have been working alongside the dragon riders to make sure that the maddened Dementors do not find their way to Stornoway village, or further inland, where they might do damage to innocent wizards.

"The violence of the shift led certain members of the Ministry to suspect that Mr. Malfoy might have been exercising some form of power over the Dementors, which kept them contained in one space. This would have explained why, when he left, they were no longer under good regulation and control. But there was no proof of this, as Mr. Malfoy had never mentioned to anyone that he might be doing such a thing.

"Thanks to interviews subsequently held with Mr. Malfoy, we have discovered that the following things are true: one—that he was indeed controlling not only the Dementors, but also, sometimes, the dragons. Two—that he was using Dark magic to do this."

An angry murmur went up among the throng of people around Harry—Aurors, guards and members of the M.L.E.S. looked at each other in fury and fear. They shook their heads and muttered.

"Please refrain from talking." Rose was quiet until the murmuring died down, and then she took a deep breath and continued to speak. "Three—that he had all along, in his possession, an object which has the capacity to destroy the Dementors."

There was a general outcry. Rose waved her hands to stop it.

"Please," she shouted. "We *must* have your attention. There is more to say. Allow me to give the floor to Sirius Black."

At the mention of Sirius, silence fell immediately. Harry looked around him and saw that nearly every face was full of apprehensive awe.

Sirius tapped his throat with his wand.

"In this pouch," he said harshly, holding it up, "is a ring. In the ring there lies a core of Basilisk's venom, and around the ring are placed curses so powerful that none who did not work for Voldemort himself can know how to operate or break them."

Many faces in the crowd went white. Harry wondered if most of them still weren't used to hearing Voldemort's name said aloud.

"The ring once belonged to Lucius Malfoy, who died last June. It now belongs to his son. It is the object capable of sending the Dementors to their deaths. It is an object so cursed that none of us here can understand fully how to operate it. Draco Malfoy, however, can."

Everyone glanced edgily at each other, as if they could guess what was coming.

"The Ministry has been forced into a very difficult situation. We have had to decide what was more important—punishing Mr. Malfoy for his war crimes, or setting him free to contribute to the destruction of the Dementors. We hope you will all agree that punishing one man is not as crucial, at this time, as guaranteeing the safety of the wizarding world from a group of creatures who have no conscience and whose only desire is to steal the souls of innocent people."

Sirius didn't speak again for a long moment. He seemed to be working to control his voice, which grew rougher with every word. He stared silently down at the pouch in his hand, with such passionate fury in his face that even Harry was slightly awestruck. If he didn't know his godfather personally, he knew he'd be just as nervous as everyone else in the crowd.

"Draco Malfoy," Sirius managed, after a long pause, "is being held nearby by several Aurors. He has not yet explained to us in any detail the way in which this ring operates. But in a moment, he will be escorted here to explain to all of you what it is that you will be expected to do. If you choose not to continue your participation at that time, you will not be punished. Your contribution is voluntary. Only Malfoy's is not. Are there any questions?"

No one seemed to want to direct a question to Sirius Black.

Finally, one witch among the Aurors raised her hand. "We'll be... using Dark magic ourselves, then?" she asked shakily.

"Yes."

The witch pressed her lips together and nodded. Beside her, a very short man in hooded robes crossed his arms defiantly.

An older wizard from the M.L.E.S. cleared his throat. "Er—Mr. Black. I can't help wondering if this whole thing might not be a trap."

Harry's heart sank. Knowing that others felt the same way he did made him sure that he was right. It *had* to be a trap. From the first time Malfoy had challenged him to a wizard's duel, he'd showed himself to be a lying coward. He hadn't changed.

"This may well have been intended by Mr. Malfoy as a trap," Sirius answered honestly. "We would not put it past him to lure us all out over Azkaban in order to harm you in some way. Precautions have been set in place."

Harry folded his arms and waited. He wasn't sure there were any precautions they could take that would be good enough to calm his fears.

"First, he will not have his wand. He will be handed it in order to demonstrate what will happen, and then he will be stripped of it when he is given this ring. At the end of this experiment, if it is successful, he will only be given his wand again if he returns the ring to us to be locked away. Secondly, the reason that we have invited so many Aurors and Enforcers to help us is that, if Mr. Malfoy does attempt harm on anyone, we want him arrested immediately and brought to shore. He is aware that any false step will result in his immediate and permanent return to Culparrat. We believe that his desire to evade a prison sentence will deter him from committing harms against you."

Seamus Finnigan snorted. "And if he's suicidal?" he called out. "I mean, what if he's willing to go down with us, just to see us all dead—what then?"

Sirius's eyes darkened. They seemed to sink deeper, making his pale, gaunt face look almost like a skull, just as it had the first time Harry had ever seen him. "As I said," he rasped finally. "You are all welcome to excuse yourselves from this assignment. It is entirely voluntary. No one will blame you if you are not willing to take that risk. Leave now if you wish."

The crowd was still. Harry waited to see which of them would go—he knew there had to be at least a few people who would not be willing to sacrifice themselves in such a way.

But no one moved. Harry glanced around at the crowd of determined faces and he felt a strange new sense of... belonging. Of community. They had *all* been through that war. They were *all* afraid to die. But none of them was willing to step down from the duties at hand. They weren't all Gryffindors—they hadn't all lost their parents to Voldemort—that wasn't what mattered. They were all good, strong people who saw the danger and were choosing to face it.

Harry's fear was cut in half. He was ready. He would do this more than willingly, he would stand with these people and fight. He looked at Ginny, who held his eyes for a moment, smiled faintly and nodded as if she knew what he was thinking. Which she probably did.

"If there are no further questions," said Arthur, stepping up beside Sirius, "then may we please have Mr. Malfoy escorted here."

Moody gave a curt nod, limped down from the platform and led a team of his Aurors away from the enclosure. As the crowd waited for his return, everyone began to buzz and murmur. Harry saw a sudden splash of water against his glasses. He took them off to wipe them on his robes.

"Oh, don't tell me it's going to rain..." said Hermione quietly.

But it was. Within seconds, the sky had grown dim and gray, and a light rain had begun to mist around them.

"It'll probably blow over," said Ginny, but she didn't sound convinced.

"I don't want you up there," Ron said under his breath, turning to Hermione. "When the rest of us go, you stay here."

"Absolutely not," Hermione said briskly. "Harry, do the Repelling Charm on your glasses and fix them to your face please."

Harry did as she said.

"Hermione," Ron said, his voice urgent, "I'm not trying to make you angry here, and you know I'd never say it if I didn't have to, but you're the worst flyer I know."

"Oh *thanks*."

"Don't get huffy, damn it." Ron took her by the elbows and turned her to him. "You never get higher off the ground than five feet, you only managed to get fifteen feet up so you could pass the class in first year, and then you never wanted to do it again. You know you can't balance. You're

horrible. You're going to get hurt."

"What about the flying keys?" Hermione protested, trying to pull away. "I can fly when I have to—and I'm not letting you and Harry go up there without me, I'm *not*—"

"You *are*." Ron kept a firm hold of her. "Listen to me now. With this many people up there, Malfoy's never going to notice if you stay back, and even if he does there are ways around it—and Hermione, if anything happened to you, I don't know if I could—"

Ron didn't finish his sentence. He didn't have to. Any of them could have finished it for him.

"And if something should happen to *you*?" Hermione whispered. She wrenched an arm out of his grip and turned on Harry. "Or you? I'm *going*, you can't make me stay, I've always been there with you, *always*, and you know you've always needed my help, and I've never—I've never stayed back unless I was *Petrified*—"

"But this isn't like that," Harry said, keeping his voice low and quick. "This isn't about that. We know you'd never leave us to fight anything without you, but *you can't fly*. You're miserable at it. It's one of about two things in the world that you can't do, Hermione, and you know it—"

"That doesn't matter. You might need me."

"Of *course* it matters!" Harry exploded in a fury. "We *do* need you!" Several people glanced at them, and Harry lowered his voice again, but he glowered at Hermione with all the force he had. "Can't you understand that? Don't you know how much we *care* about you?"

Her mouth fell open. Beside her, so did Ron's.

"You're not risking yourself as stupidly as that," Harry went on, not sure what was making them both look so shocked. "It would be different if you could fly, but you can't, and what if something happens out there? We'll need someone *here* to help us. Someone on the ground. You have to be that person—who else can get us out of a problem, if there is one? Do you *trust* anyone else?"

Hermione closed her mouth again. She stared wide-eyed at him for a moment.

"That's true..." she said slowly. "You do need someone on the ground." She glanced up at Ron. "All right," she agreed. "I won't go—but only if you *promise* me you won't get hurt."

"I promise." Ron said, his voice full of relief.

His promise didn't stop Hermione from looking terrified; she stared up at him and smoothed the front of his robes with anxious fingers.

"It's okay," Ron said gently. "Look—the Cannons won yesterday. Am I really going to die three weeks before they play in the finals?"

Hermione made a noise that was halfway between a laugh and a cry.

Harry wished there were a good enough reason to make Ginny stay behind as well. But she could fly, and she was even less likely than Hermione to stay behind when it was a matter of his safety—he knew that. Although...

"You couldn't touch that ring, you said," Harry said suddenly, turning on Ginny. "You said it hurt you."

She nodded.

"If you couldn't even touch it, then how are you going to withstand whatever magic it does?" Harry pressed. "You can't go out there either."

Ginny gave him a narrow look and opened her mouth—but before she could answer him they all heard a cold, familiar voice drift across the crowd and towards them.

"Well, well."

Malfoy. Ron's face hardened. Hermione's was a mask. Ginny thrust out her chin. All four of them turned to face the platform where Draco Malfoy stood in the misty rain, surrounded by a half-circle of Aurors, all of whom had their wands at the ready.

"What a pleasant little gathering," Malfoy sneered. His face was white with anger, but for someone who had been Stunned for weeks, he looked remarkably healthy. "Let me make myself perfectly clear. I've been dragged here this morning against my will in order to demonstrate the abilities of one of my *private possessions*. I was never under *any* obligation to disclose these abilities to anyone, no matter what so-called good it might have done. You all harbor other delusions, I'm sure."

Malfoy threw back his head and pointed to a blonde girl Harry couldn't quite see, who stood near Remus in the front of the crowd.

"Midgen," Malfoy spat. "I'm sure you'd like to call yourself an unbiased reporter. Well, write *this* down—no proof of any other crimes has been offered against me in court. I have been convicted of *nothing*. I am being used as a pawn and I *will* see to it that *each* of you who has supported these proceedings is rightly punished in the future." His hands were clenched. "*Rightly*," he repeated. "In the future. When there is once more a Ministry uncorrupted by nepotism and prejudice."

Ron gave a loud, contemptuous snort. "When it's corrupted by money and Dark magic again,

you mean?" he shouted across the crowd.

The entire crowd turned. Many of them looked approvingly at Ron.

Malfoy's eyes traveled the back of the crowd and alit on the four of them.

"Perhaps," he hissed, "some of you are unaware of who is in *command* this morning." His narrow eyes flicked from Ron to Harry. "You will all do exactly as I say until the duty I have been forced into fulfilling has been entirely accomplished."

"Yeah, I'll do exactly as you say," Ron muttered, "the day you say I should throw you in a cage with a Chimaera."

Several people around them snickered. Harry knew that Malfoy couldn't hear what Ron had said, but his eyes narrowed further all the same.

"Oh, you don't *have* to obey me, of course." Malfoy smiled icily. "It's no tragedy to me if you die. And let me state up front that if any of you die by accident, due to some mistake of your own, I will *not* be held responsible. That much respect for the law is, apparently, still left in this pretended Ministry. It is *not* in my contract to see that you all survive our day together. As long as I inflict no deliberate harm—which is apparently of *enormous* concern—what happens to you is your own business."

"God, he's such a bastard," Ginny muttered under her breath. "He's actually enjoying this."

And he was. Malfoy pushed a hand through his hair and surveyed the lot of them with contempt and condescension written all over his face. "And so *this* is what I have been provided with..." he said softly. "And what a rag-tag group it *is*. Why, half of you are still in *training*. Perhaps we should review a few fundamentals." He held out his hand and snapped as if for a servant. "My wand," he demanded.

Harry was repulsed when it was Mr. Weasley who came forward. But he seemed quite unruffled about having been snapped for; he held out Malfoy's wand with perfect dignity.

"There you are," Mr. Weasley said calmly.

Malfoy looked from his wand to Mr. Weasley's face. He let out a long, slow breath. And then he very gingerly plucked his wand from Mr. Weasley's fingers and wiped it on his robes before holding it out.

Ginny made a soft, strangled noise, and Harry wished he were close enough to knock Malfoy to the ground.

"I am sure," Malfoy said softly, his eyes flitting to the back of the crowd again, "that there are those among you who are unwilling to use the kind of power I will now show you." He snorted softly and turned his head to look again at Mr. Weasley, who had returned to the side of the platform and was watching quietly. "I am sure, for example, that most of you here would prefer to use methods of murder other than the Killing Curse."

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Ron stiffen. Saw Hermione put her hand on his shoulder.

"But you will learn to speak the Killing Curse today, with real *intent*. Or you will not get what you want."

Harry's stomach churned. The Killing Curse—*Avada Kedavra*. He knew that Ron had said it once, but he wasn't sure that he could force his own mouth to shape the words that had taken his mum and dad. Cedric. Hagrid.

"That doesn't make sense," Hermione whispered. "I thought it didn't—"

"If you have something to share with the rest of us, Miss Granger," said Draco loudly, sounding uncannily like Snape, "please do speak up."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. She tapped her throat. "*Sonorus*. It doesn't make sense," she said, just as loudly, as the crowd turned to face them. "The Killing Curse has no effect on the Dementors," Hermione went on. "It's already been tested on them—if it were that simple, this would have ended months ago."

"Perhaps if you'd stay quiet long enough to hear anything all the way through, you wouldn't always have so many *inane* questions," Malfoy sneered, and the crowd glanced edgily at Hermione and then at Ron, who was bright red. Hermione, however, only shrugged and tapped her throat again.

"*Quietus*," she said, and quickly took Ron's hand to hold him back.

Malfoy smirked and looked away from her. Harry thought it should have been impossible for someone to remain so childish.

"The Killing Curse alone is not enough," Malfoy went on. "There is a ring—which I believe you were shown. It contains a level of magic that I *alone* among you can control. I will unleash that magic around all of you—you will see it in the air, it is visible. Within the bounds of that magic, the Dementors will be rendered vulnerable to deadly magic. So long as you and they are within the

boundaries I create, the Killing Curse will be enough to destroy them."

It was so simple. Harry felt a surge of anger—so *simple*. All Malfoy had to do was perform a bit of magic around a particular area, and the Dementors would be practically mortal—this could have been done months ago. *Years* ago.

"There are, of course, complications," Malfoy said with satisfaction. "First, after the curse falls around all of you, you will not be able to pass through it until *I* end the incantation."

"He's trapping us," Ron muttered. "Wonderful."

"Second," Malfoy continued, "the Dementors won't be able to escape either—they are incapable of passing through this magic. So the Patronus Charm will not be able to drive them far. You will have to kill them in order to stop them coming near you."

Harry's heart went cold. He hadn't imagined that he wouldn't be able to drive the Dementors off with his Patronus, in case of an emergency. He supposed it wouldn't matter *too* much—after all, they'd all be on brooms, and they would have the advantage of height over the Dementors, who would be restricted to gliding across the water.

"Third." A vicious smile lit Malfoy's face. "The magic that I am about to use does not only make the Dementors vulnerable to death. It also *feeds* them. Expect to see them developing... interesting powers, as time wears on."

"What *kind* of powers, Malfoy?" shouted Ron, again not bothering to charm his voice. He didn't have to; it rang out across the crowd so loudly that the people near them covered their ears.

Malfoy laughed. "Why, I don't *know*. As I said, it would take time—and I've never witnessed any truly incompetent wizards at work with this magic. But I'm certain we'll find out today."

Near the front of the stage, Harry heard Fred—or perhaps it was George—call Malfoy something would have made Mrs. Weasley shriek in protest under any other circumstances. But when Harry found her in the crowd, she looked as though she quite agreed.

"My last word of warning," said Malfoy, who now looked very relaxed, "is that the Killing Curse does not discriminate. *Do* be careful who you're aiming at." He smiled as though he didn't care at all. "Now." He flicked his wand and, in the air before him there appeared an intricate, three-dimensional map of Azkaban. "I'll be here," Draco said, pointing to a high place in the air just above the center of the prison. "The rest of you will spread out here." He drew a circle around the perimeter of the island. "And when the curse falls around you, it will look like this..."

Out of thin air, red light shot up from the point just above the prison, then arced out in all directions. It cascaded downward in a massive dome of light that surrounded all of Azkaban and a huge stretch of the sea, going so far as to touch the shoreline at the dragon camp. It was enormous. There must have been twenty square miles of sea within it. Harry tried to imagine them all inside it, using the Killing Curse against the Dementors. He tried to imagine a hundred of them, trying not to hit each other—tried to imagine all that green light.

He swallowed the desire to throw up.

The map vanished. Malfoy surveyed them all again. "Are there any questions?" he asked lazily. "Do you all understand?"

A hundred cold, silent glares met his question, but Malfoy seemed unperturbed. He held out his wand towards Mr. Weasley.

"I'll take my ring."

But it was Sirius who approached him, and Malfoy obviously hadn't been expecting it; he jerked his hand back and seemed to shrink when Sirius reached for his wand. For the first time since his appearance, Malfoy looked like what Harry knew he was. Spineless. Somewhere near the platform, a flashbulb popped.

Sirius disarmed Malfoy and carelessly threw his wand to the nearest Auror while Malfoy looked on, clearly furious. Standing several feet from Malfoy, Sirius held up the pouch that contained the ring in his left hand, and drew his wand with his right.

"Let me remind you," Sirius said, in the rasping voice Harry had first heard from him, "that if you misuse this opportunity, it will be your *last*."

Malfoy tossed his head in an attempt at arrogance. Instead he looked like he was having a seizure; his hair fell into his eyes and he had to push it back. Hermione gave a low, satisfied laugh.

Sirius suddenly flicked his wand—Malfoy flinched—a gleaming Firebolt 5 appeared between them, hovering in midair. Malfoy's eyes widened and he gripped the broom, pulling it to his side.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded angrily. "You have surveillance privileges on my property, not free reign to enter my home and take whatever you—"

"Your mother turned it over to us," Sirius interrupted severely. "She is also here."

Malfoy's eyes were not the only ones to scan the crowd. "Where?" he barked. "And is she—"

"Free, yes. Her trial was held this week, as per your agreement with Privy Brown."

"And so she *was* proved innocent." Malfoy gave his pale head another toss, and this time the arrogance was real. He pointed to Eloise Midgen again. "Put that in there," he commanded. He dared a step closer to Sirius, reached out and snatched the pouch, and fished out his ring. He tossed the pouch aside.

Malfoy slid the ring onto his finger and flexed his hand. At once he looked tall and confident again.

"I have no further instructions to give any of you," Malfoy said flatly. "I want this *over* with. Those who are coming, follow me."

He mounted his broom and shot into the air. Behind him, the semicircle of Aurors followed suit and surrounded him—they flew in a tight unit towards the shore.

The crowd around Harry began to take flight—the Auror who had spoken to Sirius, the M.L.E.S. wizard who had thought it might be a trap, the short man in hooded robes whose broom looked no better than the ones the Weasleys had ridden in school. Harry noticed Mrs. Weasley hurry over to where Mr. Weasley was mounting his own broom, while Moody looked on. He saw Mick O'Malley grab Rose off the platform and nearly suffocate her with a hug before flying off with Charlie and Cho. He saw Remus, looking grave, step up onto the platform to confer quietly with Sirius. He saw the twins and Angelina soar off after the Aurors, looking fit to kill. He saw Bill helping Fleur tie her hair back, and registered some surprise that she was getting on a broom as well. He saw Lavender kiss Seamus. Heard Hermione say something frantic to Ron. Felt Ginny's hand push through his hair.

"Come on," she said quietly, and mounted her broom.

Harry and Ron both did the same. They both gave Hermione a long look—she reached out a hand to each of them and they squeezed hers hard. And then they were gone with the rest, up in the air and following Malfoy to Azkaban.

The misty rain had turned to a light drizzle; Harry was glad that Hermione had instructed him to charm his glasses. It was much easier to navigate when he wasn't blind. When he had flown between the rocks that marked the exit of the dragon camp, Harry could see the expansive shoreline, stretching forever in both directions, while the dark gray sea stretched out ahead, choppy and cold, even in June. Over it hovered Malfoy, who had stopped and seemed to be waiting for something.

"There they are," Malfoy called, when Harry, Ron and Ginny joined the rest.

Below them, at the edge of the shoreline, guards were driving back Dementors in groups that seemed almost too large to handle. Aurors flew close to the creatures and began to drive them out towards the island, while Harry, Ron and Ginny flew closer to Malfoy. They hovered there, facing him and all his Auror guards, splitting their attention between him and the sight of hundreds of Dementors being driven out to sea.

"Where's Granger?" Malfoy demanded, glaring at Ron. "I specified that she was to be involved."

"She's involved," Ron said curtly. "You *didn't* specify that she had to be in the air. She's working on the ground."

"Working on *what*?" Malfoy snarled.

"Ron? Harry?"

Harry jumped. Hermione's voice, clear as a bell, was ringing in his head.

"I'm with Penny and Moody and Rose and Diggory and—"

"Everyone who's not up here," Harry finished, tapping his wand to his ear. "We've got it. Go on."

"Tell us immediately if there are any emergencies, and we'll do whatever we can. We've split up the participants between us so that we won't have a hundred people shouting at us all at once. Moody's going to be in contact with all the Aurors, Diggory's got the M.L.E.S., Rose is on call for Mr. Weasley and the P.A.P.—except for you—and Penny's communicating with the mediowizards—they're not going to be flying, though. They'll be on a raft down below you, with Eloise and Colin. They're going to stay a bit further back. "

Harry didn't blame them. "Who are you communicating with, then? Just us?"

"Everyone who's not specifically employed in any given group. Ron and Ginny—the twins can hear me, and Angelina—Bill and Fleur—Remus and Sirius..." Hermione paused. "Hello, Malfoy."

Malfoy's mouth was tight and the corners turned down. He looked positively disgusted.

"Can everyone in your group use the Communications Charm?" Hermione asked. "If not, you need to teach it to them, Harry—speak up if you don't need help."

"I've got it," said Remus, in Harry's head, and he appeared at their sides a moment later to demonstrate the charm to those who didn't know it.

Sirius, on the other hand, didn't answer. But there was a loud, rumbling noise in Harry's head

a moment later—like an engine. And it wasn't just in his head—it was also behind him in the sky. Harry turned, saw what it was, and gaped in astonishment.

Sirius was on the motorbike, grinning at them all, his hair damp and stringy around his face.

"I fly best this way," came Sirius's voice in Harry's head. "Always did. I'm looking forward to doing a bit of damage with her."

"That," Malfoy said in what was obviously total irritation, "is blatant misuse of a Muggle artifact if I've ever seen—"

But Sirius revved the engine so loudly that the rest of Malfoy's commentary was drowned out.

Harry smirked and pushed back his own damp hair.

"God," Malfoy muttered, and pivoted sharply in the air. "The sooner this is over, the better."

Harry actually agreed with him. He followed Malfoy and the Aurors away from the edge of the shore with Ron on his right and Ginny on his left, knowing that Remus and Sirius were right behind him. He glanced down at the shore and saw a tall, beautiful blonde woman who was standing as still as a statue, her eyes on the sky. For a split second he thought it must be Eloise, but the features were too sharp. The expression too haughty.

"Who would ever marry into that family?" Harry muttered, tearing his eyes away from Narcissa Malfoy as they continued to fly.

"Considering the filth I imagine *you'll* marry into, *Potter*," came Malfoy's furious voice in his head, "I hardly imagine you can appreciate my mother's choice."

Harry had forgotten that their Communications Charms were on. He burned in embarrassed anger for a moment, until one of the twins told Malfoy to do something that made for such a funny visual that all any of them could do was snigger, no matter the dire circumstances.

"That's right," Malfoy breathed a moment later. "Enjoy your last few moments of immaturity. It remains to be seen if any of you can withstand what you are about to be shown."

They all fell silent. Harry flew forward with the wind in his hair, and tried to pretend it was Quidditch—that they weren't flying out to Azkaban to be subjected to curses. That it wasn't all going to be controlled by Malfoy.

"Can the illustrious, *pure* Potter survive the channeling of such *Dark* magic?" Malfoy's leering voice was audible to all of them. Harry felt Ron's worried glance.

"Perhaps not, Weasley—" Malfoy paused. "And I'm talking to the Healer," he added. "Perhaps..." He lowered his voice to a very soft whisper. "Perhaps you'll have to watch him die after all..."

Harry's stomach turned, but to his surprise, Ginny's mouth lifted in what was almost a smile. She adjusted her grip on her broom and squinted against the rain. Little tendrils of her hair were coming out of her ponytail and curling against her neck and temples in the wet weather.

"You obviously don't know what happened to the last person who told me I'd have to watch Harry die," she said, looking very relaxed. She glanced sideways at Harry. "Got any giant fangs handy, Harry?" she asked.

It took Harry a moment to understand what she meant. When he did, he felt a lurch in his stomach—had Riddle told her she would have to watch him *die*?

"What are you *talking* about?" Malfoy hissed.

"Oh, never mind," she said cheerfully. "I suppose you had to be there." She snorted. "Come to think of it, you probably would have *liked* it there."

Harry flew closer to Ginny's side as they continued towards Azkaban. For several minutes there was silence, except for the whipping of the wind past his ears, and the rushing of the rain where it met the surface of the sea.

When they came in sight of the prison, Harry heard several low gasps in his ears—he looked at who was near him in the sky and saw Ron, Ginny and the twins all looking aghast at Azkaban, where it rose out of the sea like a vast, rotting tomb. They had never seen it—not even Ginny had seen it this close, for all the time she'd spent at the dragon camp.

"*What is it?*" came Hermione's anxious voice.

"Azkaban," Ron answered faintly.

Harry looked over his shoulder at Sirius, who was gripping the handlebars of his motorbike so tightly that his hands were as white as his face. Beside him, Remus was gazing down at the prison, his usually mild eyes full of horror.

"Where..." Remus's voice was nearly inaudible.

Sirius didn't answer, but he pointed to one end of the prison with his wand, and flicked. A single, dark turret of the prison gave off a faint, shimmering blue light, which died away almost at once.

So that was where Sirius had been kept. Harry had never asked. But he stared at the spot now, and his skin crawled.

"My God, *look* at all of you. You look like someone *died*," Malfoy drawled. He had wheeled around to face them. "It's just a building—only murderers and thieves know it as anything else."

Anger, hot and uncontrollable, shot through Harry. He put a hand to his wand.

"And unless you want to spend the better part of *your* youth in prison, Potter, I suggest you keep your temper." Malfoy smirked at him. "Granger, I do hope you're listening. You'd better get the rest of your communications team in order. Everyone must stay back, and it's no fault of mine if they don't. I'm going up to start this."

Malfoy pivoted away again and soared up over Azkaban, high into the air above the very center of the prison. The Aurors followed him.

"I said to stay back," Malfoy snapped at them, and though he had traveled far out of earshot, his voice was still perfectly audible in all their heads.

The Aurors did not budge.

"Very well," Malfoy muttered. "But it won't be my fault when you catch the full blast. I hope everyone is ready."

"Wait a minute, Malfoy," Hermione's voice interrupted. "Let everyone get into place."

Harry scanned the sky. The perimeter of Azkaban was entirely flanked by a hundred wizards and witches. He saw Charlie, Cho and Mick soaring across to the west of the island. Mr. Weasley, Bill and Fleur were off to the south. The twins and Angelina flew north, and Harry remained in the west between Ginny and Ron, with Sirius and Remus at his back. Harry had naturally fallen into his usual navigational pattern, about a quarter of a mile from the Azkaban shoreline, which put him and his friends far closer to the prison than most of the other wizards. He looked around behind them and saw that the next ring of defense started at least another hundred feet back. He recognized a few of the people from the crowd—there was Seamus Finnigan, and there was the witch who had spoken to Sirius, along with the man in a hood who seemed to be her companion. The witch looked terribly nervous, but she kept her eyes on Malfoy and seemed to be steeling herself for whatever was coming.

Harry turned back to do the same thing. He squinted out over Azkaban, where Malfoy was nearly eclipsed by the silvery-black robes of the Aurors. All Harry could see was a distant thumbnail of white-blond hair, and then the rain began to fall harder, making it difficult to see anything at all. It soaked Harry's hair and began to soak through his robes as well, making him cold and uncomfortable. He wiped his forehead of irritating, trickling drips, and gripped his broom.

"What's going on?" Hermione demanded.

Before anyone could answer her there was the sound of an amplified throat being cleared and then Malfoy's voice rang out—over the sea and in Harry's head—loud and terrible. Harry clapped his hands over his ears, but it didn't help; the voice was coming from inside, too. Ron made a noise of pain.

"PREPARE YOURSELVES," Malfoy shouted, though there was no need. It made the noise worse. "WHEN YOU HAVE DESTROYED THE LAST DEMENTOR, GIVE ME NOTICE. IF THEY DESTROY YOU FIRST, REMEMBER WHO IS TO BLAME. I WANTED NO PART OF THIS."

Harry barely saw Malfoy thrust his fist into the air.

"GET BACK!" he shouted to the Aurors around him, but they would not go. "YOU FOOLS—" But Malfoy was laughing. "AS YOU WISH." He drew an audible breath and took an awful pause. Harry's blood ran cold and he pulled his wand—so did everyone around him. It was coming.

"*MORSMORDRE IMPERIO MORTIS!*"

There was a deafening *CRACK!* as though the sky had snapped in half—everyone jumped and tightened their grips in fear. And then, from the center of the sky above Azkaban, a thick jet of bright green light shot up and out from Malfoy's fist and blossomed across the sky like a giant firework made of emerald stars, surrounding them.

A hundred terrified screams filled the air—Harry realized that he had shouted too—Malfoy *was* going to kill them. He had shown them no demonstration of green light—this was some advanced version of the Killing Curse, this was going to slay them all at once. He heard Hermione shouting in his head, asking to be told what was happening, but he could not answer her. He could only watch as the jet of green light caught all the Aurors near Malfoy by surprise. With the force of a thousand fists, the light knocked the Aurors hundreds of feet straight out into the sky, where they dropped from their brooms and fell like stones into the sea. Whether they were unconscious or dead, Harry didn't know. He only knew that he was going to be sick.

And then another scream—this one even more urgent—began to rise from the crowd around the prison. Harry looked down, expecting to see a rush of Dementors, but they were nowhere to be seen. So he looked up.

"Oh—" Harry swore fiercely, and shot forward. "COME ON!" he yelled to Ron and Ginny, and whoever else who could hear him. "HURRY!" The dome of green light was falling all around them—but it was too close, too small. It wouldn't contain everyone—more than half the crowd was still outside it and there was no time for them to move forward; the dome was dropping like a weighted curtain, fast and violent, slicing its way down the sky towards the sea. His friends had managed to duck inside it without being hit, but Harry saw it drop down to collide with the witch and the hooded man who had been beside them—the hooded man shrieked and bolted forward on his rickety broom, just making it into the dome. The witch, however, was not as quick. The curtain of green light sliced straight into her and continued on its way towards the water. She moaned—her face went disturbingly blank—she lost her grip—

She plummeted.

"NO!" The cry was communal and several people, including Harry, dove down along the side of the dome in an effort to save the witch from her fall. But she was outside the dome of light and they could not reach her. She splashed into the water and the rain began to wash her away—through the curtain of light, they could see the mediwizarding raft coming towards her, but Harry knew they were too late. His heart thumped horribly in his chest. He hadn't seen anyone die in nearly a year, and he had hoped never to see anyone die again. But there it was. That girl's life had been taken, and they had let Malfoy do it.

"Hermione," Ginny said, her voice shaking, "they'll need another mediwizarding raft, there were several Aurors hurt—they might be dead, but if they're unconscious, they'll drown—just one raft will never get to all of them."

"Some of the other riders are picking them up until another raft can get there," Hermione replied, her voice shaking just as hard, and growing fainter with every word until Harry could barely hear her. "The ones who are—outside the dome. Where... where are all of you?"

"Inside it," Ron said quietly. His face was gray. "We're all inside it, Hermione."

Hermione whimpered.

"We need a head count," Sirius barked. "Quickly. Who's in here with us?"

"I am," said Bill at once. "It's Bill." He sounded truly shaken. "It came down right between us—Fleur's outside—I can't hear her."

"This is Angelina." She sounded even worse. "George is in here with me, but Fred—I don't know if he—it looked like the light hit him and he fell..." She drew a ragged breath.

Harry forced himself to look at Ron, and then at Ginny. They were ashen. He could not even imagine George.

"Who else, Hermione?" Sirius demanded, though his voice was very dry. "Check the rest of the lists."

There was a short pause, and in it the only sound was of the rain drumming above them. Harry realized dimly that the rain was hitting the dome like a ceiling, and sliding off. It couldn't get in. At least they would not have that to contend with.

"Hermione?" Sirius repeated. "Can you hear me?"

For a moment, Harry thought he could hear Hermione trying to speak to them—and then he couldn't hear her at all. His stomach bottomed out.

"All right," Sirius said grimly. "We're isolated. They might be able to hear us, but we can't hear them. Someone will have to fly the perimeter of the island to find out who else is with us—" He stopped short and pointed to the short man in the hood, who still hovered very near them. "You. Are you a guard?"

The man hunkered further into his hood and nodded. But his robes were neither the dark blue of the Department of Magical Law, nor the silvery-black of the Aurors.

Sirius had clearly noted this; he narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "Well, get your hood off," he commanded. "Let's see you."

But the man backed away on his broom, clutching his hood closer.

Sirius raised his wand. "We have no time for *games*," he spat, and flicked his wand. The man's hood flew back.

Harry's jaw dropped.

"A-Adam!" Ron spluttered. "How the hell did you..."

Adam's face was a mixture of terror and intense satisfaction. He gripped the old Cleansweep he was riding and gave his head a very Malfoy sort of toss. He opened his mouth to say something, but the sound was lost in the pounding of the rain, and Harry realized that Adam didn't know how to use the Communications Charm. Remus flew to his side at once and helped him.

"Adam?" Bill's voice was disbelieving. "What are you on about, Ron?"

"I'm—he's—*here*," Ron answered, still gaping. He pointed to Adam. "How the *hell*?" he repeated.

"Knew where to go, didn't I?" Adam was audible now, and he jerked his head towards Ginny. "I went to that pub where she was kissing Malfoy in the magazine. I flew from there."

"*Adam?!* " Bill sounded furious. Seconds later, he appeared, rocketing around the side of the island, his ponytail whipping against his neck. He zoomed up beside Adam and, before anyone even had a chance to speak, binding cords shot out of the end of his wand, bringing Adam's broom and his irrevocably together at the tails and nearly crushing Adam's leg.

"OW!" Adam shouted.

Bill didn't seem too compassionate. "Get on," he ordered. "*Now*."

"I'm not getting on a broom with you—"

"Oh. Yes. You. Are."

Adam didn't have a choice. Looking very angry, he slung his leg over Bill's broom and climbed on behind him. The two brooms came together with a *snap!* and Bill bound their noses together as well.

"I'm a *good flyer*," Adam muttered hotly.

"You're an *idiot!*" Bill fumed. "You don't even know the Patronus!"

"They said we wouldn't need it—" Adam protested. "I know the Killing Curse—and *you* said I needed to choose who to fight for!"

"*Be quiet!*" Bill twisted around to fix furious eyes on him and Adam quailed. "You know this wasn't what I meant, and if you don't then you're not as smart as I thought. You don't even have a wand, do you?"

Adam defiantly pulled one from his pocket of his robes. "Found it in a drawer," he shot. But the moment he swished and flicked, the wand changed shape in his hand. Suddenly he was holding a trout, which wriggled from his grip and twitched back and forth as it fell helplessly to the sea.

"Weasley's Wizard Wheezes," Ginny whispered. She looked ill.

Adam swore.

"Yes, that'll help," Bill snapped. "Look, just stay back behind me until this is over. You don't have a choice."

Looking sheepish now, and duly scared without any wand, Adam pressed his mouth shut.

"Harry," Ginny said suddenly, as Bill sped back to the other side of the island with Adam at his back. "Look at Malfoy."

Malfoy. For a minute, Harry had forgotten him. Everyone turned and squinted up into the source of the green light, and Harry realized in some horror that Malfoy was... *inside* it. It had surrounded him completely, and he looked as though he'd been petrified in a massive cylinder of green glass that hung suspended above the prison. His fist was still in the air and his head had fallen back. His mouth was open and his eyes were shut.

"Malfoy, can you hear us?" Harry shouted.

Malfoy did not answer or move.

"How are we going to get *out* of here?" Ron roared. "He didn't know how to use that bloody ring—look at what happened, the curse isn't nearly as big as he said it would be. He's probably never even done this before, he was just *bluffing*, and now people are hurt and we're trapped—"

Sirius revved the engine of the motorbike and cut Ron off. "Dementors," he said hoarsely. "Below."

Harry looked down and immediately began to sweat. He tightened his grip on his wand. While they had been organizing themselves, the Dementors had begun to glide out of Azkaban. They were still pouring out, all several hundred of them, covering the circular surface of the sea within the dome and turning up their mass of hooded faces to the sky. Their rattling breathing mingled together and filled the air, whispering horribly in Harry's ears and making his head spin. He had never seen so many of them at once. They were so densely packed together that he couldn't even see the surface of the water.

"They're... starving," Ginny managed. She looked sicker still. "I can... feel it."

"Spread out," Sirius ordered. "Make an even ring around the prison. We'll each have to be responsible for several dozen of them— we'll take sections and shoot down at them from above."

Shoot down at them. Shoot the Killing Curse. As his friends flew away from him and spread themselves out in a ring, Harry licked his lips and swallowed hard. He would say it. He had to say it.

"Arthur's at the back of the island," Sirius said, after a moment. "With Viktor—and Mick—I'll stay on this side with Remus—who's around the other side?"

"Charlie," came Bill's voice. "And Cho. And a couple of wizards from the Department of Magical

Law—”

“Two other Aurors here, as well,” said Remus. “That’s everyone. The rest are outside.”

Harry hardly had time to think about their odds—perhaps a dozen people against several hundred Dementors—before he heard the first curse resound in the bright green sky.

“*Avada Kedavra!*”

Sirius had begun. Harry saw a flash of dim, green light flicker from beyond a far wall of Azkaban. He heard a strange, moaning noise, and then a sound like a hundred ghosts whispering together.

“Oh, God...” Sirius’s voice was a rasp. “Look at that— look at it—”

Harry couldn’t see it.

“*Avada Kedavra!*” shouted Sirius again. And then Harry heard Remus’s voice. Bill’s. He could not hear Charlie, Mr. Weasley, or the rest of them, but several flashes of green light from the far side of the prison made him sure that they were working.

It was time. Harry looked over at Ron, who was now at least twenty feet away. But Ron wasn’t looking at him. He held his wand, and seemed to be trying to work his mouth.

“*Avada...*” But Ron’s will wasn’t behind it. His voice trailed off, he lowered his wand and he stared, expressionless, down at the Dementors.

As if to help him, Ginny’s voice rang out in Harry’s head. It might have been the worst thing he had ever heard.

“*Avada Kedavra!*” she shouted, with absolute authority.

Her voice. That curse. Harry didn’t think he could stand it. But his eyes flicked to his left so that he could see what she was doing—so that he could watch whatever happened.

Ugly, green light rocketed out of Ginny’s wand, blowing her back several feet towards the edge of the dome. She gave a harsh, involuntary cry and obviously had to work to hold onto her wand and broom. Harry’s eyes followed the jet of light down to the Dementor it aimed for—he watched the flood of green connect mercilessly with the hooded face, and he expected to see the Dementor go rigid, to see its hood fall back and see its face go blank. To see it fall, spread-eagled, into the sea. That was the way the Killing Curse worked. It was instantaneous. It stole *everything*.

Perhaps it was because the Dementors had never been human to begin with; Harry didn’t know. But when the light connected with the sightless face the Dementor gave a vicious roar—it flung out its long arms—its slimy, bony hands protruded from its sleeves. Its hood fell back as Harry had expected, but its face...

Harry felt a thrill of horror as the Dementor’s mouth began to gape, dark and dry, the lipless mouth stretching in all directions, wide and black like the mouth of a vacuum in space. And while its mouth stretched, the Dementor’s chest swelled—its robes became wide and full like a well-built human’s and its hands clenched in something like pain. For a second, Harry thought that the Dementor must be breathing in—that it must be sucking up the air around it, and that Malfoy had been wrong—they weren’t going to be able to *kill* them. They were only making them stronger, making them more capable of sucking souls than they had ever been. The Dementor’s mouth was opening wider—wider—the lips splitting at the blackened corners and pulling back over the face, rending more withered skin as they went, exposing rotting teeth and peeling away still further—exposing the bone of the nose—the chin—the cheeks... The Dementor’s mouth stretched so wide that its jaw cracked open and its teeth came apart, opening over the socket of its neck, tearing its head in two and leaving nothing but a wide, dark hole into the cavity of its body.

“Oh—sick—” Ron made a noise as though he were holding back vomit.

Ginny had both hands pressed over her mouth—she was gagging too, but Harry could hardly look at her. He couldn’t tear his eyes from the thing that was happening below them. The Dementor was turning inside out from its mouth downward, and from the blackened pit of it, something white-gold was rising. A slip of something glimmering. Blinding. It seemed to be fighting against the grip of the Dementor’s open throat, but as soon as more of the dead flesh peeled down and away, the white-gold thing shimmied out in a long, blinding tendril and burst into the sky towards them. Harry drew back, unsure of what it was and whether it would hurt him. But it only shot past him and up towards the green cylinder of light where Malfoy hung, still frozen. The white-gold thing fluttered into the cylinder of light, whispered past Malfoy and escaped the dome.

Harry stared after it, uncomprehending. And then he realized that there were dozens of slips of light, all rushing towards Malfoy, all coming from different sides of the island. But very few were white-gold like that one had been—some were dull, strange green, some blood red, some were even twisted and seemed to be growing fungus. But they had one thing in common; they all seemed desperate to escape. They clawed towards the exit like angry birds who had been caged too long.

“A soul,” Ginny managed, staring towards the center of the dome in a rapture. “An innocent soul, I felt it go past—oh *look* at it, *look* at it—”

But it had already slipped away. And the souls that were pouring forth from the disintegrating Dementor now were neither lovely nor pure. Harry backed away from the rush of them and watched them fight each other, long, ugly muscles of changing light, battering their way towards where Malfoy held the ring.

And when they had all fought their way out of the Dementor's shrinking form—when there was nothing left to sustain the body that had been their prison—the Dementor swallowed the rest of itself with a sickening moan and dissipated into smoke.

One down.

Harry squared his shoulders and swallowed hard. If Ginny could do it, then he could too. He dug into the darkest corner of himself and called up his will to do injury. To murder. If he didn't really want it, then the spell wouldn't work—he knew that. But no matter how deep Harry went, he couldn't find a death wish. Where had Ginny got her violence so quickly? What had she been thinking of?

"*Avada Kedavra!*" George's voice, harsh and unhumorous, echoed in the chambers of Harry's head.

Perhaps she had been thinking of Fred. Of taking her revenge on Malfoy for hurting another one of her brothers. Harry felt a surge of hatred. If another Weasley had been hurt—if another one of his friends had been taken away—

He raised his wand and aimed. The rest of them would *not* be hurt. No matter what it meant he had to sacrifice.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" he shouted.

Harry felt the words tear out of his mouth. Felt the blast travel from his lungs to his heart to the muscles of his shoulder, felt it race down his arm and through his fingers. Death. Murder. It exploded out of his wand in a terrible surge of green light, and shot straight down at the Dementor he had chosen to kill. Because he *had* chosen to kill it. To take its life, to control it that completely. That was all murder was. Absolute control. A total claiming. Enormous and unthinkable.

And driven by something so petty. So unbelievably small. Driven by vengeance. By pride. Harry didn't want to feel it in himself again, but he had to reach down for it—there were hundreds left to kill. Hundreds. He thought back and chose, at random, a memory that made him want to retaliate. The sight of Dumbledore, his last smile on his face, his eyes alight even as he faced his death.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" Harry shouted hoarsely, and pointed again, while the hatred was still hot. "*Avada Kedavra!*"

It was the antithesis of everything he had ever believed in. It was the other side of his Patronus—and he was disturbed to note that, when he wanted it to be, it was just as strong. Was this how they had done it, in the war? Was this how the Death Eaters had fueled themselves? With anger, with personal loss, with a desire to bring about justice as they perceived it? But who was wise enough to judge that kind of justice? Whose right was it to even the score that way?

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

Was it different if the creatures weren't really human to begin with?

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

Harry was panting. He heard the others who were communicating with him; their curses rang in his head, dizzying him. He heard Ginny shouting herself hoarse on his left. She seemed tireless, and though Harry hated to hear her forced to use such magic, he was glad she was beside him. It bolstered him to know that she was there. He gave her a fleeting look and flinched—the light all around her was green and glowing, making her seem underwater. Making her seem encased in death as she continued to dole it out.

Ron had still said nothing.

Below them, Dementors were splitting open, turning inside out, swallowing themselves and releasing their hosts of imprisoned souls. There were still hundreds of them, but several dozen were now dead. It was underway. The dome seemed to pulse, bright green and tight around them, and Harry wondered what those who were still outside were seeing. *Were* they still outside? Were they watching—could they hear this? Or was it opaque—a bright green igloo—and was everyone confused and frightened as to what was happening within? Harry turned and tried to squint through the emerald wall of the dome, but he was temporarily blinded by the twisted souls that flew in hordes from the pits of the Dementors. They rushed past his body and his face, blocking his sight, tunneling upward to make their escapes.

When his view was clearer, Harry flew closer to the edge of the dome. It was dark green, but translucent. And through it, though the shapes were distorted and strange, he could make out people—dozens of people—all pressing close and shouting. He could see something else, too—something that wasn't human at all. It was all different shapes—different wisps flying towards the

shell of the dome and bursting fruitlessly against its side. Harry couldn't make out what sort of spell they were shooting out there, but whatever it was, it wasn't working. It couldn't get through.

His heart gave a sudden, cold lurch and he gripped his broom. His head hurt. Harry shook his head from side to side and tried to clear his brain of the sudden dizziness that had seized it, but he couldn't shake it—it was sinking deeper every second. And not just in his mind, but in his heart... his skin... he felt clammy and frozen and he was sinking deeper... deeper into the strange, greenish-black darkness...

"*AVADA KEDAVRA!*"

Ron's voice shattered the haze in Harry's head and he realized he had been about to fall from his broom. He gripped the Firebolt and wheeled around—and shouted so loudly that it hurt his throat.

A Dementor. Not two feet from him. But it was not alive; Ron had killed it, and it was already unpeeling itself, its mouth gaping and widening, its body splitting and uncurling to release the souls it had been harboring for innumerable years. Harry stared at it in horror—how had it got so *close*? How was it...

He looked down to be sure that he was as high up off the water as he thought. When he saw that he was, Harry's heart began to knock against his ribs. Could the Dementors... *fly*? Was that what Malfoy had been trying to warn them about?

"HARRY!" Ron shouted, zooming around the Dementor towards him, looking white and frightened. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," Harry managed, shaking. "Yeah, I'm—but-how did—"

"They're *flying*," Ron burst out in terror, confirming Harry's worst fear. "This is really bad—if we don't have the advantage of height then we've got nothing—if they decide to come up at us in groups, then what the hell are we going to—"

Harry didn't have a second to answer him. As if the Dementors had heard Ron, a small group of them was rising from the water towards Ginny's back. She didn't see them; her back was turned as she shot another curse down at the water.

"*AVADA KEDAVRA!*" Ron and Harry shouted at once.

It was terrifying. The threads of green light shot, not downward and away from all possible human contact, but straight towards Ginny. Both jets of green collided with Dementors, but Harry couldn't breathe. He'd just shot that curse towards Ginny. Towards *Ginny*.

"GINNY!" Ron yelled hoarsely. "Turn around, hurry!"

Ginny turned. Her eyes widened in fear—she faced the last Dementor in the group and raised her wand. "*Avada Kedavra!*" she cried, and the Dementor began to disintegrate. "What's going on?" she shouted frantically. "What's it doing up here?"

"They can fly," Harry shouted back. "Can't you hear us in your head?"

"Not really," Ginny managed, her face ghostly pale. "There's too much other noise—the rain and the souls and the—Harry, if they can fly..."

There wasn't a moment to consider it. All around them, the Dementors were rising. Slowly at first, in small, controllable groups, and then more quickly. And there were more of them. They lifted off the water's surface like long, breaths of terrible smoke, and drifted upwards in hungry hordes towards those who were trapped with them. It didn't seem that they could control their flight, or even that they had *chosen* to fly. It was more like their hunger had become so overwhelming, and the magic around them had fed them such power, that they were capable of doing anything in order to feed.

Harry dodged a group of them and flew towards Ginny. "We can't possibly kill them fast enough!" he shouted, shooting another curse at a group that threatened to attack the two of them. It caught one of the Dementors, but the rest continued to rise, their maws gaping, their stench unbearable. Mildew and grave-rotted death. Their breathing rattled as they came nearer, and Harry and Ginny backed up against the outside of the dome.

"Bill, are they flying over there?" Ginny called out. "George?"

Bill was suddenly panting in their heads. "They're—out of—control—" he managed, and then—"No time—*Avada Kedavra—Avada Kedavra!*"

George made no answer except a continuous, unrelenting string of curses.

"Hermione!"

Harry heard Ron's shout.

"Hermione, if you can hear us, you have to do something *now*! A spell—anything—something to keep the Dementors back!"

"*Avada Kedavra!*" Harry cried, as the Dementors drew nearer. He heard Ginny shouting it beside him. "*Avada Kedavra...*" The curse was weakening. It hit a Dementor but didn't seem to hurt it too

much. "Avada..." But Harry's mind was reeling. It hurt to concentrate. They were coming closer and opening their mouths for him, and everything seemed to throb—the air—the cacophony of terrified voices in his head—the memories that were beginning to flood him with all their power to unnerve him completely—yes, there was his mother's voice... It would have been so lovely to stop fighting...

"Harry, NO!" Ginny shouted beside him. He felt her draw closer, felt energy surge into him on that side. He kept his eyes open, just barely, and pointed his wand again. "Avada..."

He heard Ron repeatedly shouting the curse. He heard Bill and George and Angelina. Heard Remus... did not hear Sirius. Perhaps Sirius could no longer fight. Harry felt a stab of protective fear, but was too weak to act on it. The Dementors were so near... filling the space around him, sucking away every joy in his mind and leaving him with nothing but anguish...

"NO!" Ginny bolted in front of him on her broom and shielded him from another cluster of gray-robed creatures that had risen to sate their hunger. Harry dimly saw her thrust out her wand as she cried out what should have been a curse.

"*Expecto Patronum!* *Expecto PATRONUM!*"

She was using her Patronus. Still fighting to keep his balance, Harry narrowed his eyes and tried to shake off the fog in his brain. He wanted to see what her Patronus was. He couldn't remember if he had ever...

From the end of Ginny's wand blossomed something bright-silver with wide, wonderful wings that seemed to be on fire with silver flame. It soared forward and gave a long, perfect trill.

"A phoenix," Harry whispered, and something deep within him stirred. Was Dumbledore with them, even here?

"Get up, Harry," Ginny shouted. "Snap out of it, you have to help me, I can't do this on my own—*Expecto Patronum!*"

Harry was suddenly awake. It was as if a space had been cleared around them both—he looked quickly to the right and saw that Ron was trying the same technique. So were the rest of them; all over the dome, within the thick, green light, a host of Patronuses galloped and soared—driving the Dementors back towards the prison.

"It's the only way," Ginny shouted. "We can't kill them fast enough in groups like that—we can only drive them back—"

"But they *have* to die," Ron shouted back. "We have to finish this, or what's the point?"

Harry wasn't sure what the point was anyway, if they were never going to get out of this cursed circle. He looked up at Malfoy, who was still a statue in a flood of light, and he wondered how on earth all this would end. "*Expecto Patronum!*" he shouted, pointing his wand at a throng of Dementors who were rising even faster than before. Prongs galloped forth and knocked them back towards the shore—but not very far this time. Harry tried again.

"*Expecto Patronum!*"

He was amazed that he could swing from the Killing Curse to the Patronus Charm without blinking an eye. He almost didn't want to see Prongs ride in this place—it was horrible to see the beautiful, silver stag canter uselessly to shore to break against the rocks—horrible to watch as the lingering wisps of silver smoke were swallowed at once by a haze of putrid green.

It was worse to see the Dementors rise up again in greater, faster numbers, and advance again into the sky, pushing their hoods back. Opening their mouths.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" Harry shouted again, but the spell had even less of an effect this time. The Dementors only barely retreated, and then continued on their way with increased determination. "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Perhaps it would have worked if there had been anywhere for Prongs to drive them. But the Dementors only paused this time, under the pressure of the stag, before continuing into the air again even faster—sickeningly faster—

Harry found himself backing against the dome once more. There was nothing to be done. He felt the familiar dizziness cascading over him as dozens of them filled the air around him. He tried to fight. Tried to wrench his eyes open and look at Ginny—*she* would give him strength. She'd find a way through to him. He looked at her and his heart nearly stopped.

Ginny's face was slick with perspiration. Her expression had gone slack—her hands were nearly limp on her broom—she looked as though her last efforts had spent her entirely. She was staring forward at the Dementors without even raising her wand. "I can't," she murmured, and Harry heard the words fall like bombs in his head. "You were right, Harry it's... it's this magic. I shouldn't be near it like this... I can feel... Riddle..."

The Dementors seemed to sense her weakness. They changed direction and aimed, in one body, for Ginny, whose eyes were closing tight. She looked like she was having a terrible nightmare—she

began to shake all over—Harry knew he had to do something, but he *couldn't*. He had nothing left. He knew it wouldn't help, but he managed to edge in front of her, shielding her as she had shielded him. The Dementors pushed forward, reaching out their hands for him—for *her*. Desperate to help her, Harry tried to work up the energy for one more spell—just one more—he barely raised his wand.

"Hermione!" Ron shouted again, backing against the dome and fighting tooth and nail to drive the Dementors back down to the island. It wasn't working. "I know you can hear me—we can't hold them back—you *have* to help us—you have to *hurry*. I *know* you can help us—*Expecto Patronum—Avada Kedavra*—"

Ron was surrounded, and Harry could not get to him. The sounds of his struggle were terrible, and Harry tried to point his wand in that direction too, but he could hardly even hold onto it. He backed further up towards Ginny, groped for the end of her broom and pulled it towards him until his hand came to her knee. He pulled her behind him as far as he could. Their broomtails were colliding—he felt her forehead fall against his shoulder—

"Harry... I'm sorry..."

But there was nothing to be sorry about. He couldn't fight them either. He could only take the blow first, and he would do it—he would rather have lived, he thought almost idly, as the Dementors made a semi circle around the front of him and pressed towards him. He would rather have lived and had her with him for a long, long time. But if there was only this, then he would go first. The world was fading—growing blacker. The light was flickering in and out. Sounds were unbearably loud and then suddenly silent, as if someone had flicked a switch—and then unbearably loud again. Harry felt as though he was looking straight through the Dementors. He didn't see them at all—didn't see their hungry mouths widening as they fell on him—hardly smelled their decaying breath as they brought their open lips near his. Instead he saw Hagrid's face. Snape's leer. Cedric's body. He heard his father's desperate shouts.

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off—"

His father had gone first, too. Harry was slumping, but he kept his hand on Ginny's knee and used the last of his strength to push her further behind his back. If he had to die, then it would be in front of her. That was what love had always meant.

Harry's eyes fell shut. He felt bony fingers clutch his face...felt his chin being tilted up... felt a cold, sucking sensation near the corner of his mouth and knew that it was over...

Light.

Harry gasped and turned his head—but not to escape the Dementor—not to save himself. It was only that the light was so bright that it was painful. It was going to blind him. It was coming right through his eyelids to scorch his eyes—it was white hot and frightening, and it was moaning—screaming in unearthly frustration...

Bony fingers slid from Harry's skin and there was a rush of incredible wind. It was coming from behind him... skimming along the sides of him...pushing past him and driving the despair away, to where it could not reach him. Harry felt his head begin to clear. The darkness was lifting... his strength was being restored... he felt the most insane urge to *laugh*...

"Oh, Harry..." Ginny's voice was soft and awed. "Look up..."

Harry found that it was suddenly easy to open his eyes. He blinked up, and felt wonder wash through him, so profound that he could not find his voice to speak.

The dome was *silver*. Harry gazed at it in wonder—was this the same magic? It couldn't be. Was it a curse? No... But what it was he could not tell. He looked to his right and relief swept him at the sight of Ron, who was still alive, barely grasping his broom, his head thrown back and his eyes shining. His chin was trembling.

"Hermione," Ron whispered. "You're a *genius*."

"They can't get out," Ginny said softly, separating herself from him to fly on her own again. "They're trapped where they are—and I don't think they can fly anymore either—look."

Harry glanced below them and was amazed to see that the Dementors could not get within twenty paces of the dome's edge now. They were held back by something bright and beautiful—they were unable to go near it. They could not fly up towards it either, and so they were trapped on the surface of the water, writhing in a helpless, anguished mass near the shore.

The dome of silver light gave one great, shuddering flicker. Harry jumped and glanced up. If the spell was already dying, then they had very little time.

"Sirius?" Harry managed. "Are you all right?"

"I'm here," Sirius rasped. From the sound of his voice, Harry guessed that their experiences just now had been extremely similar.

"And everyone else..."

"I see no one hurt."

"Neither do I," said Bill. "Adam, are you—"

"I'm... all right," came Adam's muted voice. He sounded as though he'd seen enough to last him a lifetime. Harry knew the feeling very well.

The dome flickered again, and Harry felt an urgent sense that they had to finish it *now*.

"Do you... think we can still kill them?" Harry managed, looking down again at the Dementors, where they twisted and screamed and tried to fight their way towards human life. Perhaps whatever Hermione had done had knocked away the power of Malfoy's ring. He looked up at Malfoy to see what was happening at the source of the dome's terrible power.

To his surprise, Malfoy looked exactly the same, and so did the light around him. It was still green, and it still arced out away from him. The curse was still in place.

Harry drew his wand and pointed efficiently. If they were going to finish it, then they had to do it with no further threats, which meant that they had to do it fast, before the Dementors developed yet more unheard of powers. And they had to do it before the silvery spell lost its influence.

Harry thought briefly of his mum and dad. He allowed his mind to travel, in hate, over the memories he had of Peter Pettigrew in the Shrieking Shack.

"*Avada Kedavra*," he shouted harshly, and watched as the green light hit the first Dementor it came to. He was relieved to see the creature begin to turn itself inside out. It was still working—they could still do this.

The dome flickered violently, and Harry heard several anxious gasps within his head.

"Hurry," he said, pointing his wand again. "We have no time to lose. Everyone hurry and finish it. Right now."

He didn't know how long they worked. Probably several minutes, though it felt like several hours. His voice grew hoarse repeating the same deadly words, and his mouth was dry and strangely metallic. His tongue felt thick and unwieldy—he needed water. He knew there had been a good reason for those dragon riding jackets; there had always been a flask of water and a snack or two tucked away in the pockets. But he continued to shout the curse, though his arm throbbed and ached and his fingers were sore from channeling the darkness.

Before he knew what had happened, he looked down to shoot the curse and saw that there was nothing left to kill. The last of the Dementors on their side had been destroyed.

It was an idea so massive that Harry didn't know what to think. Above them, the dome shimmered suddenly and seemed to shift—it looked for a moment like it might disappear completely, and Harry held his breath—but then it settled into place again.

"We should see if they need help round the other side," said Ginny quickly, and she flew off ahead of him towards the side where Bill had been fighting alongside Charlie and Cho. Ron followed her. Harry, though he wanted very much to follow them both, knew it was a brighter idea to divide their help. And so he flew towards Sirius, rounding the jagged side of the prison and coming into view of his godfather.

"Harry!"

Sirius looked mad and haggard; his eyes were glinting like a maniac's and he was still half-slumped over the handlebars of his bike. But his smile took up his whole face.

"Look at that—" he shouted in a strangled voice, gesturing towards the sea like a king to his assembly. "*Gone*."

"On this side," said Remus, who looked like he'd just come through a week of full moons. He pivoted in the air. "We should check on Arthur."

The three of them, along with two Aurors Harry didn't know, flew around to the back of the prison, where Mr. Weasley had been working with Mick and Viktor. Angelina and George were already there, both looking shocked and wan. At the sight of their faces, Harry's heart plummeted. Fred *had* to be all right. He had to.

Ron, Ginny and the rest of them joined the group a moment later, and everyone looked down at the sea together, bathed in a glow of silver light tinged with sickly green, listening to the pounding of the rain outside and the hum of Sirius's motorbike.

Harry realized that he was shaking and he wasn't sure why. He knew that he was tired. Other than that, he could hardly process what had just happened. None of it could have been real.

"There's *not one left*," said Sirius, his voice sheer with passion. "They're *dead*, Arthur."

Mr. Weasley seemed unaffected by the news. He gazed down at the water and the look on his face nearly matched the one on George's. "Yes," he said quietly. "It would appear so."

"We'll need to check inside, Dad," Charlie said. He looked exhausted, but he pushed down the nose of his broom and dove. "I'll be right back," he shouted over his shoulder.

Cho opened her mouth—Harry thought for a moment that she was choking—her eyes were wide as they followed Charlie, and she seemed to be incapable of speech.

“Don’t go in there!” she finally burst. But Charlie was already too far away to hear her—he disappeared into the graveyard behind the prison before Cho could stop him. She dove after him and hovered over the blackened trees, looking absolutely terrified. “Charlie?” they all heard her call. “Charlie, which way did you go?” She flew to the other end of the graveyard, still shouting. “I’m serious, I don’t want you in there, there could be a lot of them still hiding—please answer me—I don’t see you.”

The tension in her voice made Harry very nervous, and it must have had the same effect on the rest of them; they all dropped lower in the sky in order to make sure that they could hear it when Charlie replied.

“I’m right here!” Charlie’s voice was very faint. “Calm down—come in here if you want, I could use the help, it’s a big place and we’ve got to search it completely.”

“Get out of there,” Cho answered. “I’ll do the bloody Peeping Charm and we’ll check the place from out here, I don’t have to be on shore to do it—*come out right now!*”

Harry blinked. She was awfully upset.

Charlie emerged from the prison looking bemusedly at Cho. He ran a hand through his hair and shook his head. “Well, don’t get your knickers in a twist,” he muttered, blushing a bit. “Here I am—do the charm, then.”

Harry wasn’t sure he’d ever seen Charlie look so awkward.

Cho positioned herself to face a large, bare wall of the prison. She raised her wand and opened her mouth.

Before she could speak, the dome above them gave a final, mighty flicker, and all the light went out. There was another tremendous *CRACK!* of thunderous magic—the few people near Harry shouted so loudly that it sounded like a hundred voices together...

But it *was* a hundred voices, Harry realized in astonishment. The dome of light was lifting—lifting up from where it met the sea—cascading in reverse, and letting in the sounds from outside. The sound of the rain slapping the water, the sound of a hundred shouting voices calling all their names, the sound of one spell being incanted again and again, though Harry was sure he had never heard it said quite like that before.

“PATRONUM REDIMIO!”

Harry didn’t know what it meant. But the curtain of light was rising, the silver halo that had joined it was disappearing, and the green curse was retracting towards its source. Real daylight was washing into the cursed ring where they had all been trapped. Real air, with no death in it. Harry drew a perfect breath and briefly closed his eyes. They’d done it. It was finished. And they’d made it out alive.

“Fred—” George was the first one to duck beneath the rising curtain of stars and shoot out of the dome. “Where’s the hospital raft?” he shouted, and disappeared around the other side of the prison before anyone could stop him—not that they would have tried. Angelina was hard on his heels and Charlie was quick to follow. Bill unbound Adam from his broom and shot after his brothers. Ron and Ginny, after giving Harry a fleeting look, took off in the same direction.

Only Mr. Weasley hadn’t moved. He watched his children go, and then his eyes flickered up to where the green light was quickly receding, pouring back into the place it had come from. That ring. Malfoy.

He was still suspended in the shaft of deathly green, and Harry realized for the first time that if he still hadn’t moved, and yet the spell had gone dead, then that meant that Malfoy...

Another *CRACK!* sounded overhead. Several people screamed. In one final, abrupt rush, the remainder of the green light funneled into Malfoy’s periphery—the green cylinder shivered and pulsed—Malfoy’s ring glinted—and then the light rushed back into it with a soft, snaking sound, and all of it was gone. Malfoy was left uncovered in the rain, hovering unsupported on his broom.

His head, which had been thrown back, fell limply to one side. The fist that had been thrust into the air fell slackly down and his arm hung beside his body. For a moment it seemed that he must be awake, though his eyes were closed, because he still had a grip on his broom. But then his whole body wheeled to the side, and Malfoy dropped without warning towards the spiking turrets of the prison.

Harry watched, horrified, for one split second. He could not believe what he was seeing. As soon as he realized that it was *real*, he sprang into action—he bent double over his broom and urged it forward—perhaps he hated Malfoy, but he didn’t want to watch him die. Not like this. Harry put on a burst of speed and willed himself forward, ignoring the rain as it began to soak him again—he

would get to Malfoy before Malfoy reached the spiraling, black towers—he would not fail—

But the hands that kept Malfoy from death were not his. Harry didn't even break Malfoy's fall with his broom. Mr. Weasley had got there full seconds before he had—it was Mr. Weasley who maneuvered himself under Malfoy's plunging body and absorbed the shock of it with his arms and broom. But he couldn't absorb it entirely, and the impact threatened to send Mr. Weasley tumbling towards the prison along with Malfoy, whom it seemed he had no intention of letting go, even in defense of his own safety.

"Hang on—" In a panic, Harry lurched forward, reached out with both hands, seized Mr. Weasley by the shoulders of his robes, and yanked him up.

Mr. Weasley huffed with exertion. With Harry's help, he stayed aloft. And all the while, Malfoy lay, sprawled and unconscious, his pale head half-cradled in one of Mr. Weasley's hands as the rain slicked his hair to his forehead and his hand dangled loosely away, the golden ring still shining on his finger.

Harry pulled back, panting, and stared at the bizarre picture they made. He wasn't completely sure that Malfoy wouldn't have preferred to die.

Though perhaps he was already dead.

Barely balancing, Mr. Weasley managed to turn his broom and keep Malfoy's body propped across it.

"Come on, now, young man," Mr. Weasley said quietly, squinting through the rain. He shifted Malfoy's head towards his arm and cradled him even closer, in order to get a hold of his broom. "Let's get you to someone who can help you."

Harry was struck. A year and a half ago, when Percy had lain dead on the ground of some Death Eater camp, Lucius Malfoy had probably stepped over his body without ceremony or compassion. And here was Arthur Weasley holding Draco like a son.

Harry's heart hurt.

He followed Mr. Weasley away from Azkaban and towards the massive hospital raft, where a crowd had gathered, their brooms hovering low, their feet skimming the water. Only Ginny and George had landed on the raft itself and thrown their brooms aside; George knelt on one side of Fred with his brother's hand in both of his, and Angelina knelt on the other—Ginny was beside her with her hands out and her eyes shut, concentrating harder than Harry had ever seen her do. She seemed completely unaware of either the rain that was sliding down her nose or the crowd that was watching her every move.

Mr. Weasley cut through the crowd and two mediwizards rushed to relieve him of his burden. They laid Draco's body on a makeshift bed as Mr. Weasley landed on the raft. He stood behind Ginny.

"Stand back a bit, Dad," she murmured. "And don't worry like that, he's got a heartbeat and he's breathing."

Harry sighed out, relieved.

Ginny laid her hand on Fred's forehead and let out a breath of her own. "It wasn't the Killing Curse—it didn't even kill the Aurors it hit at the beginning—except the one it passed through. The one we watched fall."

Harry wished he could forget the image that flashed back into his brain. Even one life was too much. His eyes flicked to Malfoy's prone body, lying cold and untended in the rain, and he tried to feel the same kind of forgiveness that Mr. Weasley had shown.

He didn't feel it at all.

"But it did—it did pass through him," Angelina whispered, wiping her eyes. "I saw it. Not straight through him, but—"

"Just here." George touched the side of Fred's head with a shaking finger and drew an invisible line from his ear to his shoulder. "It got his head a bit, and went down through his arm. Is—is his head all right, Ginny?" George sounded very young, and completely shaken. Harry was sure he'd never seen him look so frightened.

"My head's a sight prettier to look at than yours," Fred croaked.

It was a moment before everyone realized what they had just heard, and then an explosion of noise went up from the hospital raft, and Ginny bowed her head and put a hand over her eyes, laughing and crying at once.

George alone still looked serious. His eyes were suspiciously red, and he didn't take his hand off Fred's shoulder, even when Angelina bent over Fred to kiss him square on the mouth.

"I should get injured more often," Fred mumbled.

"Is Fred all right?" came Hermione's voice in his head. It was so unexpected that Harry nearly

fell off his broom. He had forgotten that he could communicate with her out here.

"Yeah—Hermione, he's fine—" Harry pushed back his wet hair impatiently. "Almost everyone's fine—was that *your* spell that—"

"Where's Ron?" she demanded, cutting him off.

"Right here, Hermione," Ron answered in a voice that wasn't meant for anyone but her. Harry knew it. Ron caught Harry's eyes fleetingly from where he hovered at the other end of the raft, and they both turned very red and looked away from each other. "Er—we'll fly back in just a minute, all right?" Ron managed in a very different soft of voice, which cracked a bit. "See you in just a minute."

"All right," she said, a bit breathlessly. It sounded to Harry like she might have been crying. "Just a minute then. Oh—I'm so happy you're all *safe*—" There was a little sob followed by a soft *click* in Harry's ear, and he knew that Hermione had ended the charm.

Ginny pushed herself to her feet and searched the crowd around her. She found Harry almost instantly and came towards him where he hovered on his Firebolt at the edge of the raft. She worked her way between the beds of two of the Aurors who had been knocked out of the sky, and she had almost taken Harry's hand when her eyes fell on the bed to her left.

"What..." Her hand faltered and she stared down at Malfoy, who wasn't breathing, as far as Harry could tell. His stomach wasn't moving at all. "Did any of the mediwizards..."

Harry shook his head. No one had been to this end of the raft since they had put Malfoy down. Everyone's attention had been focused on Fred.

"Someone should have *told* me," Ginny said anxiously, dropping down beside Malfoy and putting her hands out at once. She hissed and snatched her hands away. "What *happened*?"

Harry told her about Malfoy's plummet and her father's save. "No one wanted to interrupt you from Fred," he finished quietly. "I wasn't going to stop you helping your brother, even if—"

"No, I know..." Ginny's face was shadowed and rings had begun to appear beneath her eyes. She put her hands out again and winced, but kept them there. "He was in that light for so long," she muttered. "I have no idea what it was. It might take a while to wake him."

"Then he's... not dead?" Harry managed. He wasn't sure why he was so relieved.

"No, he's not dead," Ginny said grimly. "But he might wish he were when he wakes up." Her hands scanned his head and then his chest, and then she swept them down the length of him while Harry looked on in part-fascination, part-disgust. To see her working on Malfoy in any way that required her hands was more than he could balance in his head. He knew better than to think anything of it, but that didn't make it pleasant to watch.

"His ring's gone," Ginny murmured. "Did it fall off at the end? Did the magic destroy it or something?"

Harry frowned. He remembered, very clearly, having seen that ring on Malfoy's finger when Mr. Weasley had held him. "No," he said slowly. "It... are you sure it's not on him?"

Ginny nodded.

"Harry!"

Harry's head snapped up—Ron's shout had sounded like an alert. "What is it?" he began, but he didn't need to ask. His eyes focused past the crowd around the raft and towards Azkaban, and his heart sank.

Gliding towards them across the water, moving at top speed, there were several dozen Dementors.

It wasn't over. Despair crashed through Harry, and he felt hollow.

"They must have been inside the prison," Ginny said, sounding nearly as weary as he felt. "At least... at least there aren't too many of them left."

But after what they had all gone through all year, Harry thought it was ridiculous that even one was still alive, let alone dozens. Did this mean that the P.A.P. wouldn't be disbanded? Would he have to work for them forever? The idea exhausted him completely, and he hung his head, listening as several wizards began to drive the Dementors back again. He couldn't bring himself to help them. It wasn't *fair*.

"It's all right," Ginny said quietly.

But it wasn't. Harry heard the roar of Sirius's motorbike growing distant—he must have been helping to drive them all back again. Harry didn't want to follow. He didn't want to see his godfather. He didn't think he could bear to witness that level of disappointment. He glanced down at Malfoy's bare hands and wished that the ring were still there. If it had been, he would have taken it up over Azkaban and finished off the Dementors himself.

"Come on."

Harry looked dully over at Adam, who was staring, determined, into the sky.

"Come with me," Adam said urgently, and gripped his broom with one hand. The other he had shoved in his pocket. His eyes glistened. "You're good at stuff like this."

"Stuff like what?" Harry asked, confused.

But instead of answering, Adam flew off towards Azkaban, where several wizards were now working to contain the Demtontors in a small space.

Harry exchanged a wary look with Ginny, then hurriedly flew after Adam. "Don't go any closer," he shouted. "Remember, you don't have a wand."

"I don't need one," Adam shouted back, throwing a confident look over his shoulder. "Hurry up—we have to finish it. Just because *he* couldn't do it doesn't mean it can't be done."

Harry didn't know what Adam was on about, but he had a bad feeling that it wasn't very wise. He knew that he was right a moment later, when Adam put both hands on his broom in order to pull up higher, and something on his finger flashed.

"ADAM!" Harry roared, realizing with a shock of fear where the ring had gone. "DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT!"

But Adam raced ahead much more quickly than he should have been able to on a Cleansweep, and Harry was hard pressed to catch up to him.

"Don't worry about it, Harry!" Charlie shouted distantly, from below. "Burke and Lisa went to shore to get a couple of dragons—"

But Harry wasn't trying to patrol the prison. He was trying to stop a boy who was apparently as much of an idiot as he himself had once been. He gained on Adam's broomtail and reached out to grab it, but Adam managed another burst of speed, and the broomtail slipped out of Harry's grasp.

"YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW THE SPELL!" Harry yelled furiously. "YOU'RE GOING TO GET YOURSELF KILLED—NOT TO MENTION THE REST OF US—"

"I HEARD WHAT HE SAID," Adam shouted back, not slowing down in the least. "I KNOW THIS IS RIGHT—STAY BACK—"

Harry couldn't possibly stay back. Nor could he stop Adam. Frantically, he tapped his wand to his throat. "SONOROUS! EVERYONE—GET BACK NOW! GET BACK—ADAM'S GOT THE RING—"

Harry was too far up now to see the reactions of those below, but he imagined that they were all as terrified as he was. In a last effort to control the boy, Harry pointed his wand at Adam's fingers and tried to bring the ring to him. "ACCIO!" he shouted, but at the same moment, Adam thrust his fist into the air and threw back his head.

"MORSMORDRE—IMPERIO—MORTIS!"

Adam's hand flew open—the ring shot off his finger and tumbled upwards through the air—it spiraled and flashed and then, as though an invisible hand had grabbed it, it froze in midair and exploded in a shattering of bright green light.

The light burst away in all directions, twice as bright as it had been before—Harry threw his arm across his face to shield his eyes, but he couldn't shield them long. He had to look. He had to know what was happening.

The light raced outward—shooting stars rocketed far away in every direction—Harry waited for them to drop, to cascade down in a curtain of light as they had done before, and to trap him, Adam, and all the wizards near the prison in a cursed dome.

But when the diameter of the dome was as wide as Harry could remember, the light didn't stop at all. Harry gaped at it as it continued to widen, shooting farther and faster than it had when Malfoy had performed the spell, growing in size until the sky itself was green as far as the eye could see. Until the roof of the dome sheltered not only Azkaban and a short space around it, but what seemed to be all the water in the sea—or at least as far as it stretched to the shore. Only then, at that far distance, did the light seem to Harry to be dropping in a waterfall of light, to touch the sea and trap them all.

He wondered why he didn't *feel* trapped.

He looked up into the sky for the source of the light, searching for the ring. But all he saw there was one enormous, bright-gold star, from which a million fingers of terrible green light were radiating.

Harry stared at it, his heart pounding in his chest, and then he dropped his eyes to Adam who looked... was it happy? The boy's face shone and his eyes were alight as he turned a circle on his broom and saw what he had done.

"I knew it," Adam whispered. "I knew it was all wrong as soon as I heard it, and I knew I could do it *right*. I don't know how I knew."

Ideas flickered briefly through Harry's mind. The boy was a Slytherin. His parents had been

Death Eaters. He was even related to the Malfoys. Perhaps he'd used such magic before and they just didn't know it—perhaps he had natural tendencies that even the Weasleys would not be able to train out of him.

Or perhaps it was just that he was a talented young wizard who had wanted to use the spell for the *right* reasons. It had happened before. Harry glanced at the bright-gold star again and for the second time that day, he felt that Dumbledore was somehow right beside him. His heart surged with hope.

"Can I use your wand?" Adam asked suddenly. "I want to try it—on the Dementors, I mean."

Harry shook his head slowly. "No... you shouldn't use that curse."

"But—"

"No." Harry met Adam's eyes. "But I want you to stay with me, all right?"

Looking rather proud, Adam nodded.

"And Adam," Harry mused, looking up at the star again. "I don't suppose you know how to... end this incantation?"

"Sure." Adam shrugged easily. "It's just *Finite Incantatem*—"

"You're... sure?"

Adam pushed back his damp fringe and frowned. "Yeah I... I am." He gave a funny laugh. "I don't know why, I just feel like I understand..." He gazed away and shook his head a bit, as if trying to clear an unwelcome thought out of it. "But I'll need a wand to do that— I think I should end what I started. I have a feeling it's safer that way."

Harry looked at him for a long moment. "I'll give you my wand when it comes to that, then," he finally said. He looked down and saw that, below them, all the wizards and witches who had wanted to participate before were finally getting their chance. Mingled Killing Curses surrounded the prison in a nimbus of green light and the Dementors were coming apart again, one by one. Souls rushed upward and brushed past Harry and Adam, flying towards the bright-gold star at the apex of the dome and slipping away into space.

"HARRY! ADAM!"

Ron, Bill and Mr. Weasley were flying rapidly towards them, all looking relieved to find them both alive and well.

"We're all right," Adam called out. "Don't worry!"

"Don't worry?" Mr. Weasley gasped despairingly as they all pulled up close, panting. "Don't worry? You may be all right at the moment, Adam, but mark my words, when Molly gets a hold of you—"

Adam blanched. "But—but you don't have to tell her anything," he offered hopefully.

"He *won't* have to tell her, you daftie," Bill said, staring at Adam as though he were a creature he'd never seen. "There's a news reporter down there. They've got pictures."

"Then I'm in trouble." Adam looked downcast for a moment—and then he gave them all a brilliant grin. "But I'll be in the newspaper," he added, sitting up tall. "We should be taking care of the rest of the Dementors, I expect," he said in a cheeky tone that made Ron roll his eyes. "Come on."

But when they looked down to see what more needed to be done, it seemed that everything had already been taken care of. Harry was not surprised that a hundred powerful wizards had taken on the remaining Dementors with relative ease but it was strange to see everything looking... calm.

They all flew together towards the water, near where Sirius was sitting on his motorbike, staring at the prison with a face full of wonder.

"The Aurors have gone in," he said, in a rough whisper, when they were all around him. "They're making sure that not a single Dementor is hiding." He gave Adam a piercing look.

Adam shifted his shoulders uncomfortably.

"You're mad," said Sirius, in the same rough voice. His eyes gleamed. "Well done."

Mr. Weasley opened his mouth as if to protest that it had actually been foolishly done, but then he sighed as if he knew that the only really meaningful lecture would be delivered by a woman wagging a ladle. He gave Adam a fond look.

They waited together for several minutes. Everyone who was still capable of flying was in the air, waiting in a hovering group just over the water, near the shore of Azkaban. Harry looked behind them and saw that the injured Aurors, the twins, and Malfoy were all still on the hospital raft with the mediwizards. So was Ginny—and though she was too far away for Harry to really see her face, he knew that she was looking at him.

"Hi, Harry."

He heard her voice, soft and low, rising suddenly in his head, and he felt a blush start up in the pit of him. He glanced nervously over at Mr. Weasley, but it didn't seem he'd heard anything.

"No one can hear me but you."

Harry felt the blush crawl up the front of him and threaten to show itself on his face. He cleared his throat meaningfully and turned away from the raft, so no one would notice him staring.

"It's all right. I know you can't answer me." Her voice was lower still. "My dad told me how you caught him, when he caught Malfoy."

But he hadn't done anything, Harry thought. It had been Mr. Weasley that had done all of it. He wanted to protest—

"And don't bother trying to tell me you didn't do anything," Ginny said, her voice full of laughter. "I swear I can read your mind—"

Harry felt a surge of panic and he flushed completely. No—no she couldn't.

"No, not really, Harry."

But apparently she *could*. Or else she knew him very, very well.

"I love you so much," she said quietly. "You're the best man in the whole world."

Even if he had wanted to speak, Harry knew he couldn't have. His heart was pounding so hard that it threatened to break right through him. He looked up and focused on the bright-gold star that hovered over Azkaban, and hoped that no one could tell what he was hearing.

"Thank you for... staying in front of me," she whispered. "That's—that's twice I owe you my life."

Harry bowed his head—she was wrong. They were even. She'd saved him twice—she'd saved him more often than that, though perhaps she didn't know it.

"I can't wait..." Ginny hesitated. He heard her draw a soft breath as if she were bracing herself. "I can't wait to be alone with you, Harry," she managed. "I really need... to be *alone* with you."

Harry wasn't sure he'd ever be able to breathe again. The tone of her voice gave him the most insane ideas—the most gorgeous ideas—

"Harry, are you all right?" Mr. Weasley asked.

Harry gasped—his eyes snapped open. He hadn't realized that they were closed. He looked over at Mr. Weasley in a panic and nodded, and Mr. Weasley looked back at him in obvious concern.

"You were falling asleep," he said worriedly. "Do you need to go and have a lie down on the raft?"

Harry couldn't tell him that if he went and had a lie down on the raft, it was very unlikely that he would be able to do any sleeping. He just shook his head.

"No, Mr. Weasley," he said much too formally, forcing his voice not to crack. "I'm fine."

Mr. Weasley gave him a funny look.

"Mr. Weasley, sir!"

Everyone looked towards the entrance of Azkaban, where the Aurors were emerging from the front doors. They mounted their brooms on the shore, lifted into the air, and flew straight towards Mr. Weasley and the rest of them. The Auror at their head gave a salute.

"Not a single Dementor remains, sir," he said.

"Every chamber has been searched?" Sirius rasped, before Mr. Weasley could answer. "Every tower, every underground cell? And the cemetery?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Black. All searched, sir."

"Then..." Sirius drew a ragged breath and his eyes paled and brightened at once, as though a light were shining through them from behind. "It is finished." Both he and Remus looked out over the prison, and over both their faces swept a kind of peace that Harry had never seen there before.

"Finished," Remus repeated, very quietly.

"Almost," said Mr. Weasley.

Sirius's head swiveled and he stared at him. "What do you mean *almost*?" he demanded. "It's done, Arthur. They're *gone*."

"But I've got to finish this curse," said Adam, as though it were something he did every day. He looked at Mr. Weasley. "Right, Arthur?"

Mr. Weasley nodded. "It wasn't what I was thinking of... but yes. That's right."

"Then can I, er—" Adam looked expectantly at Harry and put out his hand.

Harry drew his wand and handed it to Adam, who took it with great care, as if he knew that it was something very special. He gave it an experimental flick, and a shower of silver and green erupted from the tip.

"Nice!" said Adam approvingly. "Great wand."

Harry had never seen it behave in such a Slytherin manner, but he knew it made perfect sense that it had that capacity. And he agreed that it was, indeed, a great wand.

Adam raised it, and looked towards the sky. His sandy fringe fell back and he thrust his arm into the air.

"*FINITE INCANTATEM!*" he shouted.

His young voice rang out like a bell beneath the wide, green dome. But instead of the loud, snapping finish that Harry was expecting, there was a rush of cool wind all around them as the green dome shrank towards the golden star, which shimmered as it collected the green fingers of light back into itself, drawing them back along the sky to reveal the world in all its usual colors—the horizon became a wonderfully dull, rainy gray again, and the eerie green sea turned back to dusky blue.

Harry felt as though the curse was slipping not only out of the sky, but out of his body as well. He felt it rush away from him—and it wasn't just the curse. He felt the ache of dragon riding leave his lower back... he felt the pounding headache that hadn't really left him in months suddenly vanish into thin air... he felt his lungs lighten as though he had been breathing something thick and ugly for a long time without even realizing it. All of it was going away—abandoning all the dark corners of his body and leaving him strangely empty—but clean. Exhausted and clean. Harry felt as though a wave of the ocean had just washed straight through him—salt-cold and strong and perfect. He wanted to climb into bed and sleep for a dreamless week.

When the green light had ebbed all the way inward and nearly disappeared, there was a hissing rush of air... a long, soft noise like someone drawing in a final breath... and every last tendril of green was swallowed up by the star that had been their source.

BANG!

Everyone jumped and flinched against the blast of white-hot light. The star had exploded above them into one massive firework of white and gold. It spread across the sky even further than Adam's dome had gone, reaching out across the heavens in all directions as far as Harry could see. It gave one final, terrible flash—a sheet of lightning that lit the world for one moment, illuminating every amazed and upturned face. And then it glittered away into nothing, leaving the sky silent and thick with blue-gray clouds and muted daylight.

Harry tried to process the enormity of what had just been done, and found he could not do it. Vaguely, he wondered what time it was. He turned up his face to catch the rain and listened to the steady wash of the sea below.

Peace.

"Are you ready, Sirius?" asked Mr. Weasley softly after a moment.

"Ready?" Sirius repeated. His voice seemed distant, and Harry opened his eyes to look at his godfather, who had also thrown his head back and seemed to be concentrating on feeling the rain.

"To get rid of it."

Sirius opened his eyes. They were bewildered. He pinned them on Mr. Weasley and a crease appeared between his black eyebrows. "Get rid of..."

Mr. Weasley didn't answer. He merely swept his hand from left to right, indicating the island and the prison.

A thrill pierced Harry as he watched comprehension dawn on Sirius's face.

"Get rid... of..." Sirius's voice caught. There were signs of a terrible struggle in his eyes, and then he tried his voice again. "Rid... of Azkaban?" he managed.

A faint smile touched the corners of Mr. Weasley's mouth. He nodded.

"Of *Azkaban*," Sirius repeated. Then all at once, he let out a strangled cry of joy, his shoulders sagged, and he turned towards the prison with fierce satisfaction in his face. He was silent for a long time, holding his wand in his hand, his fingers trembling. He didn't seem to know where to begin, or what to say.

"I thought you'd like the honors," Mr. Weasley finally said, very gently. "It will take help, of course—but I believe the first blast should be yours."

"Help?" Sirius echoed. He gave a jerky laugh. "I sat in there for twelve years—I sat in there thinking—just *thinking*—" He turned on Harry and gave a short, disbelieving laugh. "About your parents, and Remus, and you—and *Peter*—oh, my God, my mind never stopped for one single second—I used to dream of taking my cell apart stone by stone, I used to use every scrap of my will to try to summon a wand without having one to do it with—I *fantasized* about destroying that place—I don't need *help*—"

He sounded younger and more alive than Harry had ever heard him. He gripped one handle of his shining motorbike, threw back his head and tapped his wand to his throat.

"CLEAR THE ISLAND!" Sirius shouted, and his voice echoed across the sky. "I'M GOING TO CAVE IT IN!"

Wizards and witches flew out and away from the prison, clearing the perimeter. Sirius waited until they were safe, and then he laughed—a young, clear, ringing sound—and revved his engine to

advance on Azkaban. He rushed forward toward the island with his wand out before him, and flashed a brilliant smile over his shoulder all of them as he went. And then, without waiting for another second, Sirius turned and aimed.

"ERADICUS!" he cried.

The word rang in the air, amplified and passionate, and Harry felt a chill. The Annihilation Curse was one step down from an Unforgivable. It was the curse the Death Eaters had used at Gringotts—the curse that had been heard by the people of Mont. St. Mireille before their school had come tumbling down. But here... for this purpose... it was the right curse. And with Sirius's will behind it, Harry felt sure it would destroy Azkaban entirely.

There was a sudden, low rumbling, like the start of a massive earthquake. Harry watched Azkaban, transfixed, as enormous slabs of prison rock began to give way at the tops of the walls. The entire structure was crumbling inward from the edges. And just outside it, on a giant, flying motorbike, Sirius Black was laughing.

"Ron-Harry-oh—"

Harry's eyebrows shot up. It was Hermione's voice, it was frightened, and it wasn't in his head—both he and Ron whirled around and gasped.

Hermione had somehow managed to fly all the way out to the prison. She was wobbling back and forth, clutching her broom like a very little girl, and her face was very white.

"I—" she managed shakily. "I heard your dad say it was going to get destroyed and I—I *had* to see."

Her hair was very, very wet. So were her clothes.

"Did you..." Ron stared at her. "Did you... fall *in*?"

Hermione didn't answer, but it was clear from her appearance that she had. She was shivering. Harry waited for Ron to say something clever that would make him want to snort.

But to his surprise, Ron sped to Hermione's side without cracking a single joke. He grabbed her around the waist and she clung to his shoulders.

"Just throw your leg over this one as well—that's it. All right, now let yours go—no, no, just grab onto me—good, now I've got it..." Ron helped Hermione to climb on in front of him, and then he bound their brooms together as Bill had done with his and Adam's before. Hermione let out a long breath of relief and relaxed against Ron's chest. He wrapped a protective arm around her. "There," he said. "Now you can watch all you like."

But Hermione's eyes were already on the prison, and her face had gone from pale to glowing. "Ohh..." she breathed. "That's *amazing*."

Harry glanced back over his shoulder. Azkaban's spiraling black turrets were crumbling one by one as though made of nothing but dust, crashing down against the prison and knocking away great walls of it, making it crumble, section by section, down to the jagged, wet rocks that protruded from the sea. In a moment, the prison and all the horrors it had held would be a thing of the past. It would be over, like the war was over, and Hermione was right. It *was* amazing.

But it wasn't complete.

Harry turned away from the prison and flew towards the hospital raft.

"Where are you going?" Ron and Hermione called after him together.

"Be right back," Harry said, without slowing down. He could already see Ginny watching him from the edge of the raft, and as he drew closer he saw that she was hugging herself and watching, not Azkaban, but him.

"I can't go," she said. "I want to stay here in case I'm needed—"

"You can go, Miss Weasley," said one of the mediwizards. "Mr. Malfoy is going to be just fine. We'll take him to St. Mungo's from here—there's nothing unusual or incurable about his condition."

"But you can't leave *me*," Fred shouted, from the other end of the raft. "I want attention, hurry!" Angelina slapped his stomach.

"Come on," Harry said, and dropped lower so that Ginny could share his broom, if she wanted.

She hesitated and glanced around her at the invalids in the beds.

"Come on," Harry pressed quietly. "You have to see it, Ginny. Right up close." He offered her his hand.

Ginny took it. She had settled herself in front of him before he knew what had happened, and she leaned back against him and braced her hands on his thighs. Harry felt himself growing hot—he slipped an arm around her waist—Ginny gave a lovely little sigh—

A flashbulb popped. Harry's heart gave a terrible thud—he looked up and realized, for the first time, that Eloise and Colin were on this raft too.

"Sorry, Harry," said Colin, grinning, waving his camera. "But you know how it is."

"Molest my only sister in public why don't you," Fred cried, covering his eyes with his arm. "Look away, George, look away..."

Harry flew away from the raft at top speed, amazed to feel Ginny's stomach pulsing beneath his forearm and hand. She was giggling. She was imperturbable. She was... here. With him. He pulled up to hover between Sirius and Ron—they were all together.

And Azkaban was falling.

As they watched, the entrance caved in. Rock crumpled to earth, sending up a massive cloud of dust—it hit them in a hot, forceful wind, sending their brooms astray and making them all cough. The collapsed dust of Azkaban had a stench like none Harry had ever encountered. It was death, fear and madness, all in one.

More rock collapsed; they were rocked by another revolting blast, and Hermione made a terrified noise. She clung to the broom.

"It's all right," Ron reassured her, prising her fingers off the handle. She gripped his hand instead, with what looked like painful force, and this time, when Ron caught Harry's eye, there was laughter in his face. But Ron obviously hadn't been anticipating the sight of Ginny—his eyes traveled very briefly over her, and then he glanced at Harry, questioning.

Harry knew he was red all over, but he didn't let go of Ginny. Instead he held Ron's gaze and tried to communicate, without the painful blundering of words, that this was the way things were going to be from now on.

Ron looked a little surprised. But then he smiled and looked away, and Harry knew that something important had been sorted out between them.

"Ooooh," Hermione said suddenly. "Look at the ground... it's opening up..."

The island seemed to be moaning as the last of the structure collapsed onto it, and the rocks that had supported Azkaban began split open. The sea flooded mercilessly into the cracks, filling them with mud and wet gravel. Gurgling sounds and hissings rose into the air—it sounded to Harry as though the very earth was drowning. The tide around the island pounded in towards the prison, crashing against the remaining stones and sucking them into the water.

A huge section of the shore suddenly opened like a pit—like a Dementor made of sand. Harry half expected to see souls fly out of it. But it was only a whirlpool of water and mud, with rocks sliding down into its depths—and then the water eclipsed the sand entirely and that bit of the shore was gone. A wave crashed over the place where it had been, silver with froth and foam.

"Hermione," Harry asked suddenly, "why did the dome turn silver? What happened?"

"Oh!" Hermione sounded very pleased. "Did it turn all silver? How interesting—I didn't know it would be so visual, but then I suppose the Patronus is a very visual spell—"

"Then it *was* a Patronus?" Harry asked.

"It was nearly a hundred of them," Hermione said proudly. "Well, more like seventy—but still. I could hear Ron shouting for me to help you, and I knew that the Dementors were advancing on you—I knew they were flying—"

"You *could* hear me?" Ron demanded, and Hermione nodded. "I knew it!" he said. "All right—go ahead—"

"Well, I knew the only way you'd be able to go back to destroying them was if you had some sort of permanent Patronus around you," Hermione cut back in breathlessly. "But I couldn't think of a way to do that. But then *Penny* mentioned that early on in the process of creating the Imprisonment Enchantment, she and Percy had been working with a version of *Redimio*—you know, the Insulation Charm? And the whole point of *that* particular spell is to bind together a safety ward and surround a specific area with it—Insulation Charms are used all around Hogwarts, for example, and—"

"And the point?" Ron prodded.

Hermione sighed. "Well, the *point* is that Fleur was out there, trapped outside the dome, and so we told her to try having everyone do a Patronus and then seeing if she could bind them together—*Patronum Redimio*. I hoped it would create a sort of energy field outside the dome that was strong enough to push the Dementors towards the center—I wanted you to have a few feet of space that they couldn't get into, so that you could keep working—"

"That's exactly what happened," Ginny interrupted. "It was amazing—I wish you could have seen it, Hermione, it was *beautiful*."

"I was really surprised it went so well," Hermione said modestly. "I've never had an idea that quickly before. Of course it wasn't really me—it was Penny."

Ron nuzzled the side of her neck, apparently without regard for who was watching. "It was both of you," he mumbled.

Hermione went very pink and ducked her head.

"Harry." Sirius's hoarse, desperate voice silenced them all. "Watch."

They turned—they gasped—Harry tightened his arm around Ginny and she gripped his knees.

The sea was swallowing Azkaban.

There was a sucking sound like a vacuum, and the remainder of the island was devoured by a dark, whirling pit of water. When the last of the rock had been subsumed, the ocean shut on top of it. The sea gave a heave in the tide, sending waves toward the mainland—and then settled again, quite at peace. As if nothing had ever been there to begin with—no island, no prison, no torture. Nothing at all.

It was so quiet, here, and so wonderfully cool. Wind sifted through Harry's hair. When he was able to tear his eyes from the placid, oddly empty water, he cast a glance toward Sirius.

Sirius's expression was past Harry's comprehension. He could only look at it and hope that he would never, never understand it.

"The rain's stopping," Hermione whispered.

She was right. Harry looked up and watched as the dense clouds parted—barely—and allowed sunlight to penetrate the gloom. Huge, white-gold shafts of it fell through the gray sky and touched the sea like windows. Like gentle fingers, brushing the spot where Azkaban had been only moments ago. Harry imagined that the shafts were the same white-gold as the innocent soul he had watched escape. He imagined it was the same as the star that Adam had made—the star that had pulsed and breathed and made him think of Dumbledore.

The sunlight touched all of them where they hovered over the moving water, lighting the hollows of their tired faces and making them all seem to shine. Harry looked again at Sirius, whose eyes were fixed on the light. So were Remus's—and his expression was nearly an echo of Sirius's own, as if the destruction of Azkaban meant almost as much to him.

The fingers of light suddenly retracted. The clouds fused together and boiled for another storm; the sea rolled darkly, and the wind was picking up now, blowing cold on all of them. Sirius's eyes were still fixed on the absence of Azkaban, and though Harry could tell that no one else wanted to disturb him, it was time to go in.

"Sirius," he said gently, bringing his godfather's attention away from the empty sea. Sirius turned to look at him, nodded, then cast his eyes up into the darkening sky. He gave a long, contented sigh before bringing his chin down again.

"It's time, Padfoot," Remus said quietly. "Are you ready?"

Sirius laughed softly and threw his hair out of his face. "Yes, Moony. I am." He pulled back on the handles of his bike and turned it to shore, leaning well back in his seat so that the wind hit him fully in the face. Harry saw his black hair fly back as Remus looked on, smiling. And then, without further ado, Sirius led them all toward the shore with Remus by his side.

Everyone followed. The Aurors flew past, and then the Enforcers—Seamus Finnigan looked haggard but he managed a wave and a grin.

"Time to hit the pub!" he shouted.

"See you there!" Ron shouted back.

"Oh no you won't," Hermione said quietly, patting his leg. "We all need sleep."

Sleep. Harry watched the rest of the wizards and witches pass them. He watched as the prison raft sped inland over the water. And he realized just how much he wanted his bed. A bath, and his bed. He was cold and wet and... wanting something.

As if she knew it, Ginny rubbed his knees and leaned back against him. "Come on, Harry," she murmured. "Let's go home."

Home. He wasn't sure where that was, exactly, but he followed her urging and aimed for the shore. Beside Ron and Hermione they flew back to the dragon camp, and Harry felt almost as though he were playing Quidditch. He was in the sky—which was his favorite place to be. He was with his friends—who were the best people in the world to be around. And his work here was finished. He never had to come back here—never had to put on dragon riding gear again—never had to come near a Dementor, because there weren't any Dementors. None. Never again would they come close to him and thrust him into his terrible past. Never again would he hear his father. His mother.

Never.

Something hot and uncomfortable welled up, deep in his chest. Harry didn't know if he was relieved... or if he had been deprived of his only real—albeit terrible—connection to two people he loved, whom he had never known.

"Harry?" Ginny asked softly, turning so that no one else could hear her. "Are you all right?"

He couldn't answer. He wasn't all right. And the thing he was wanting wasn't anything that she

could give him—he didn't know why. Lately Ginny had been the answer to everything—and if she wasn't, then Ron and Hermione were. But that wasn't the case either, and Harry wasn't sure what to make of the clenching sensation in his throat.

As they closed in on the shoreline, Harry saw the hospital raft being pulled up onto the sand. He watched as Narcissa Malfoy, her face a brittle mask, pushed mediwizards aside, stumbled onto the raft, and fell to her knees beside her son. Harry watched as George and Angelina walked off the raft with Fred between them. He saw Mrs. Weasley hand Leo to Penny and race down the shore towards them—saw her envelop Fred in her arms and rock him from side to side for a long time. Harry couldn't hear what she was saying, but he knew what she meant.

Mrs. Weasley moved onto George next, and then to Angelina. Bill landed immediately afterward with Fleur right beside him, and Mrs. Weasley launched herself at each of them in turn, managing to smooth Bill's ponytail and tug it over his shoulder as he pulled away. Harry was almost certain that she was telling him to cut it.

Charlie was the next one to touch down. His mother wrapped him in a massive hug, and then grabbed Cho into her arms and hugged her too, though Cho looked a bit embarrassed and unsure about where to put her hands.

Mr. Weasley landed, with Adam alongside him. Mrs. Weasley put her hands on her hips and opened her mouth so wide that, although Harry couldn't hear her, he knew that Adam most certainly could. And then Adam was drawn into a hug so fierce that Harry was sure that he couldn't breathe. And that he didn't mind.

When Mrs. Weasley let him go, she reached for her husband and he clasped her to his heart.

Harry couldn't tear his eyes away. It was a reunion—and they had only been apart for a few hours. But the relief and love on Mrs. Weasley's face spoke of terrible anxiety and awful pain—even if it had been imagined pain. She buried her face in the front of his robes and clutched him tight around his back, and Harry felt a funny surge of *déjà vu*. He could have sworn he'd seen people hold each other just like that before... but he couldn't remember whom. Or where.

Mrs. Weasley only let go of her husband when the rest of them landed on the rocks. She looked up with dim, tearful eyes as Ron and Hermione untangled themselves from their double broom. She collected Hermione into her arms first, gave her a swift kiss on the cheek, and then held her arms out to Ron, who walked into them and held her for a long time.

While Ron hugged his mother, Harry landed on the sand. His feet and Ginny's hit the ground at the same time and there was a soft bump between their bodies—Ginny steadied herself, bracing her hands on the broom handle. She swung her leg over the broom and stood beside Harry as he dismounted.

Thunder cracked. Harry glanced up at the sky, which had gone completely dark again. He gazed back out over the sea where there was... nothing left.

"Oh—Ginny—"

Harry turned back to the shore. Mrs. Weasley had opened her arms to Ginny, and Ginny all but fell into them. Harry watched as Mrs. Weasley smoothed Ginny's hair again and again. She kissed her daughter's temple and the crown of her head—she rubbed her back and then wrapped her arms around her and squeezed her close.

Harry wondered how Ginny felt. *Really* felt. Having that.

"Harry, dear—oh—"

Before he could think further, Mrs. Weasley had let go of Ginny and surrounded him with her arms. Harry felt her kiss his cheek. Heard her declare, in a weepy voice, that he was a wonderful, wonderful boy and that she loved him.

Loved him.

Harry reached out his arms and held onto the welcoming, all-encompassing warmth of Mrs. Weasley. He didn't mind that the sky had cracked open and that the rain was soaking him. He didn't mind that everyone he cared about was watching him.

Harry closed his eyes and *clung*.

A/N: Here's to Molly and Emma, who have been reading this for a long, long time, and whose Aunt Ruth likes to show us their impatient emails. You girls ROX.

An enormous debt of gratitude is owed to Firelocks, who helped with every single bit of this.

Thanks to the incomparable Moey, because... well. 87.

We bow in obeisance to the betas: Caroline, CoKerry, Firelox, Honeychurch and Moey

Oh, right—and about that whole "42 chapters and an epilogue" thing? Slight miscalculation. 43 will be the last chapter, and it will be followed by an "epilogue".

The Finals

Ginny stirred. Her eyes were closed, but she could tell that the room was already bright—she had slept in, on a school day. She wasn't worried; she had a feeling that after what had happened yesterday, Remus wouldn't be a stickler about starting lessons on time, if he started them at all. He was probably still sleeping too. Or, if he was awake, then he was probably trying to comprehend what had happened.

Azkaban was *gone*.

Ginny felt a surge of powerful joy. She stretched completely, enjoying the languorous pull of aching muscles—enjoying the way her body hit up against Harry's in the bed, when she moved. She felt another surge of happiness when she rolled onto her side and found a comfortable place on his hot shoulder to rest her head. She smoothed a hand across his bare chest and left it there. She slung her leg across him.

He touched her hair.

"You're awake," she mumbled.

Harry pushed his fingers further into her hair and rubbed her scalp in reply. It felt brilliant. It *was* brilliant, waking up beside Harry. Beside Harry, who didn't have to be *anywhere*. Who didn't have a duty in the world. Who was just hers, all day—and all night too, if she wanted.

She did want.

She curled tighter to him and kissed his shoulder... breathed in the solid warmth of him... grazed her fingertips back and forth over his chest... felt him shift closer to her and release a long, slow breath. She had wanted more, last night—and so had he—than either of them had had the energy to give. Harry hadn't even had the energy to be shy; he hadn't asked for permission to come over, or waited for an invitation. He had simply Apparated into her room in the middle of the night and crawled into bed beside her, giving her a delicious shock. His shirt had come off almost at once, and they had twined together and kissed in the darkness until they had been too deliriously tired to continue.

Ginny was so caught up in remembering the loveliness of it, so lost in her own happy energy, that it took her longer than usual to notice that Harry's was... not as happy. Not at all. His body was warm and radiant, but there was a faint, distant chill in the air around him.

Perturbed, Ginny lifted her head slightly and studied his face.

He was staring at the ceiling. He couldn't be looking at anything in particular—he didn't have his glasses on and there wasn't anything there to begin with. But he was staring with strange focus, and then, as if he didn't want to be noticed doing it, he closed his eyes and turned his face away.

"Harry?" Ginny asked, her voice croaky with sleep. She picked herself up a bit more and propped herself on her elbow. "Is everything all right?"

She could only make out the edge of his profile; she couldn't be sure of his expression. But she knew that something was bothering him very much, and that he was trying to keep her from noticing. He should have known that was impossible.

"What is it?" Ginny pressed. "What's wrong?"

Harry stayed silent. He took hold of the hand she had rested on his chest, and he rolled away from her, bringing her with him until she was spooned around his back, her arm around him, her hand in his, her leg still slung over his hip.

He wanted comfort.

Ginny nuzzled the back of Harry's neck, still shocked, in many ways, that she was allowed to do it. For years she had craved the right to hold him close to her heart and give them both this kind of relief, but it had seemed like a pipe dream for so long that she had almost learned to content herself with just the fantasy of Harry. She wondered if she would ever get used to the fact that he was with

her this way, and that he wanted her like this, and that he needed her to ease him.

"Can't you tell me what you're thinking about?" she asked quietly. "Please, I want to know."

Harry shifted back against her. "It's morbid," he mumbled. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

"Nothing's wrong with you." Ginny found his heartbeat with her hand and lay her palm over it. His heart pulsed quickly in his chest. "You can tell me anything—I won't think you're strange. Whatever you're thinking, I've probably thought it myself."

Harry hesitated. "It's just... that girl. The Auror who died yesterday."

"Moody said her name was Leda Barnes."

Harry nodded. "I was having a nightmare about her," he said faintly. "She was... screaming for help. And if I'd just gone a little faster, I know I could have done something about it."

"You could have done something about it where?" Ginny asked. "In the dream? Or yesterday, at Azkaban?"

Harry shrugged and didn't answer, and Ginny knew that he was blaming himself. A vibration, cold and uncomfortable, was rising from his skin and taking shape all around him. It was something like a wall—close. Compact. Ginny stretched her hand over his heart and tried to brush the wall away, but it resisted. She could feel it pushing between their two bodies, trying to knock her back. She stayed where she was and didn't give it room to grow.

"You couldn't have helped her," Ginny said, as calmly as she could. "We all dove, we all tried, and we all failed. But it wasn't our fault, Harry. No one was expecting what happened."

"I know."

But that didn't change the fact that his energy wrestled against her, dark and desperate, wanting her gone. It wanted to expand and overwhelm him, to make him miserable without any interference. Ginny wasn't going to let it.

"You might know... but I don't think you really *believe* it," she said gently. "You think you're responsible. Don't you."

Harry didn't answer. He didn't have to. The air all around him was putting up a fight. This wasn't a conversation he wanted to have—he wanted to be left alone, didn't want her to try and strip his guilt away from him. He felt he deserved it. Felt it was his duty to live with it. And it was bigger than the death of one Auror—it was bigger than what had happened at Azkaban. It was an overwhelming sense of responsibility and it contained within it the burden of many lost lives, all of them sitting on Harry's shoulders, where *he* had squarely placed them.

"Who else is your fault?" Ginny asked suddenly. She knew it was a terrible question. She knew it had the potential to send him running. But she was certain he needed to answer it. "Who else do you think you could have saved, if you'd tried hard enough?"

Harry froze in her arms. He didn't even seem to be breathing. There was fear around him now, and despair, and grief, and she knew that, just at present, he was furious with her. Ginny worried that he was going to bolt—that he was going to push his way out of her bed and Disapparate and never come back.

He drew a jerky breath. "It's not something I can just *list*," he said savagely.

His anger wasn't really with her, but he was directing it at her in full force. Ginny tried not to take it personally, but it was difficult.

"I know that," she said. "And you don't have to answer if you don't want to—but I know something's really bothering you, and you shouldn't have to *be* this upset." She pressed her hand to his chest, feeling it collapse as he breathed out. "It doesn't make sense. I mean, you never have to fly another dragon, no one's ever going to be Kissed by a Dementor again, Sirius is going to be about a thousand times happier—"

"My mum and dad, for a start," Harry said abruptly.

Ginny blinked, and then realized that he was answering her question. She wanted to contradict him—to tell him that his parents' deaths hadn't been his fault at all, and that he'd only been a baby, and that he had to let that go. But she stayed quiet, rubbed the spot just over his heart with her fingertips, and listened.

"Cedric."

That's not your fault either.

"I know Dumbledore was protecting the whole school but I still think I should have been able to..."

No.

"They never would have hurt Hermione's parents if she wasn't a friend of mine."

Ginny knew it was true. But that still didn't make it his fault.

"Your brother," he said, very softly.

Ginny's heart gave a terrible throb. "That's not true," she whispered. She couldn't let that one go. "You can't blame yourself for Percy—you weren't even there, and it was Pettigrew who killed him."

"But I let Pettigrew *live*," said Harry, in a voice that sounded very far away. "You didn't know that, did you? Ask Ron. I had a chance to kill him—and I *knew* what he was—and I let him live. Think of everyone he killed after that. And I could have stopped it.."

Grief and compassion battled for first place in Ginny's heart. "That doesn't make you Percy's murderer," she finally managed. "It makes you *merciful*. If you knew what he did to your parents, and you still didn't retaliate, it only shows how good and noble—"

"I still wonder if Ron thinks about that," Harry cut in softly, as if he couldn't hear Ginny at all. "But I don't want to ask him."

Under her hand, to Ginny's great surprise, she felt Harry's chest give a funny jump. She closed her eyes and tried to sense what was happening to him.

"Ron loves you," she said gently, when she realized that he was close to tears. She wasn't certain what she would do if Harry really cried. The idea almost terrified her. "Ron wouldn't have wanted you to kill anyone."

"Ron never hesitated to do what he had to do. I did."

"No."

"And I wasn't noble when we left Hagrid, was I? I let him die."

Harry's chest hitched again, and Ginny held him closer to her. She wanted him to turn and face her, but she had a feeling it was easier for him this way, when he didn't have to look at her. She hadn't heard him mention Hagrid since last summer—she knew Hagrid's death had been the worst blow for Harry, in many ways.

"It was *my fault*."

Dark, swallowing grief swept around the two of them—along with guilt. Guilt that was brittle and ugly and unbearable. Ginny winced against it. It made the grief unclean. It separated her from feeling it fully—it kept her from understanding it.

"Hagrid was following *me*," Harry's voice was harsh and choked. "He was trying to look after *me*. After Dumbledore died, Hagrid barely let me out of his sight—not even to go to classes. He used to stand around outside Potions in case Malfoy had orders to try something, did you know that?"

Ginny did. But Harry wasn't looking for an answer.

"He acted like a bodyguard, and I tried to tell him—" Harry gave a hollow, awful sob. He tried to muffle it in the pillow, but didn't quite manage it.

Ginny's heart ached. She buried her face in the back of his neck to let him know that she was there, and close, and with him.

"I tried telling him to stop it—I told him I didn't want him hurt, but I never *really* tried to stop him, because I always felt better when he was around—"

Harry made another muffled noise of grief... the last of his resistance was slipping away... the cold vibrations rose away from his body and dissipated in the air around them both, leaving them in a flood of heat and anguish. Ginny felt herself pulled into the center of his powerful bitterness; she lay in it with him and felt it fully. It tore at her heart as she listened to him talk.

"He told me not to leave school grounds for any reason—he said I wasn't to risk myself no matter what, and I promised him I wouldn't. But it was *Ron*."

Ginny's stomach gave a horrible wrench. The *choices* Harry had been forced to make. So many of them were just unthinkable.

"I couldn't wait for the teachers to look for Ron after he was kidnapped—I couldn't wait five seconds. Even if I'd wanted to, Hermione wasn't going to, and I couldn't let her go alone." Harry shook his head. "I couldn't. And I knew Hagrid had made me promise always to tell him where I was going. But I broke that promise, because I was afraid he'd find a way to stop me. So we just left. And I keep telling myself that if I'd told Hagrid where I was going, he probably *would* have stopped me, and we might not have found Ron in time. But then again, if I'd only told him..." Harry drew a difficult breath. "He might have understood and let us go. He might not have followed us in there."

For a while, Harry seemed incapable of speech. His shoulders shook. Eventually he rolled onto his stomach and hid his face, and Ginny felt helpless to comfort him. She laid her hand on his heaving back and quietly stroked it, reminding him that he was not alone. She had never seen him like this. He might never have been like this. Perhaps he had cried before, privately, but it was just as likely that he hadn't. In fact... Ginny closed her eyes and felt a heave in his energy that seemed to come right from his spirit. And it did feel like the first time that it had ever experienced anything like this.

"I should've known he was watching me all the time." Harry's voice was almost lost in the pillow.

"I should've *known*. But I wasn't thinking about him at all, I didn't even know he'd followed. I don't even know how he got into Malfoy Manor, I just remember looking down at Mrs. Lestrange on the ground, and suddenly Mr. Lestrange was pointing his wand at me, and Crabbe and Goyle had theirs on Ron and Hermione—and then before I knew what had happened, Hagrid was in front of all of us."

Ginny could imagine it. Hagrid—warm, beautiful, wonderful Hagrid, who filled whole rooms and was the only one big enough to block three people.

"He told us to run, and we did," Harry went on, sounding almost frantic. "But *how could we?*" Harry gave an unmistakable sob. "I only wanted to get Ron out of there, it was all I cared about, it was the only thought in my head, and Hagrid was supposed to be right behind us. He *said* he was right behind us—the door was *right there*. But then there was—green light—"

Even in the heat of Harry's grief, Ginny was freezing cold.

"And I wanted to go back—I *tried* - but Ron and Hermione wouldn't let me go, they had me by the arms—but I could have broken free, I know it. I should have helped him—"

"You couldn't have helped him," Ginny said, very faintly. "If you saw green light, then it was too late."

"But I left him there to *die*."

"Oh, Harry, no. No, no." Her eyes stinging, Ginny sat up and ran both hands over his trembling back. "You've never left anyone to die. Hagrid *chose* to help you. He would have followed you either way. You couldn't have stopped him, because he cared about you too much."

"I know he d-did—"

Ginny's chest hurt. Her eyes were flooding. She couldn't believe that Harry was allowing himself to be so vulnerable.

"He was the f-first one who ever did—after my parents—" But Harry could speak no more. He flung both arms up onto the pillow, crossed them under his face, and sobbed right into them.

"Come here," Ginny said faintly. Her eyes had blurred completely, but she groped for Harry—she lay on her back and tried to pull him towards her. He let her do it, shifting until his body was slumped half on top of hers and he was grasping her shoulders, his face buried in her chest. Ginny cradled the back of his head and rubbed his back, and he wept into the front of her summer nightdress, soaking the thin cotton and her skin. He had come apart. He was beyond himself.

Ginny didn't know how long she held him. She wasn't sure how long he cried. She cried a little too, and rocked him when it got worse, and ran her fingers through his hair and mumbled any words she thought might help him.

When his tears finally shuddered to a halt, Harry sniffled against her. He was quiet for several minutes, and then, very slowly, he drew back and rolled off of her, onto his elbow.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled.

"Don't be."

He gingerly touched the front of her nightdress, which was wet through.

"I don't care about that," Ginny said, covering his hand with hers and keeping it there.

Harry looked down at her. She knew he couldn't see her very well, but his eyes scanned her face anyway.

"Hagrid told me I was a wizard," he said softly. "He took me away from the Dursleys and brought me to Diagon Alley to get all my school things. It was the first time I ever saw... any of it." Harry sniffed. "And he bought me Hedwig. For my *birthday*." Harry sounded somewhat amazed, as though he still couldn't believe the first friendship he had been shown. "Did you ever know that?"

Overcome with tenderness, Ginny reached up for his face and brought it down to hers, so that she could kiss his very damp cheek. She tasted salt and skin.

"No," she said.

"He's the one who told me about my parents," Harry said, still quiet. "Told me who I was. Sort of." He gave a funny little smile. "No one ever *really* told me for years." He gazed at the pillow, and then he sighed, dropped back down and rested his face against her neck. "I feel strange," he mumbled, and the words were soft against her skin. "It's... good and bad."

Ginny longed to tell him that he felt strange because he was mourning Hagrid for the first time, instead of bottling his grief inside of ugly guilt. She knew, because she had only just begun to mourn Percy at Christmas—her own grief had been trapped in something numb and uncomprehending. She knew that when it finally hit, it was both more painful and less horrible.

But the words were unimportant. He felt it; that was what mattered. Ginny had the sense that Harry had come to the beginning of a very long and difficult road, and that he was afraid of it—but that he was willing to walk it. And she knew that he would find his way, because she would walk it with him and make sure.

Harry lay curled against her for a long time, and Ginny held onto him. The sun grew brighter every minute, and the bedroom became almost uncomfortably warm. Harry eventually kicked off the covers, which was a relief—except that the rush of air reminded Ginny that her nightdress was very short and had obviously ridden up.

Harry's energy made a very sudden shift—he lifted up on his arms and dropped down again, but now his body was fully on top of hers. Ginny let out a low, involuntary sound of satisfaction at the pleasure of being pinned by his weight. As if in reply, Harry made a noise of want, and his mouth was so near Ginny's ear that the noise echoed in her head. It stirred something in her that made her forget that she was fairly new to all of this, and that she still felt a bit bashful with him. She bent her knee and softly dragged her toes up the outside of his leg.

Harry sucked in a breath. His hand found the outside of her thigh and he grasped it, making Ginny feel dizzy.

Yes.

"Do you—have lessons today?" he managed.

"I think so," she whispered, arching a little beneath him when he dragged his fingertips down to the outside of her knee and back up again. "But I'm not sure—It depends—on Remus—"

Harry was kissing the very sensitive skin just below her ear. "When will you be finished for the day?" he mumbled.

She knew what the real question was. A brilliant, terrified thrill shot through her. He was going to take her up on yesterday's invitation—Ginny could hardly believe she'd said those things right in his ear. She wondered what sort of girl that made her, then realized she didn't care, because it had worked, and Harry certainly didn't seem to mind, and they were going to be alone together in the way she desperately wanted to be alone with him.

"What are *you* doing today?" she asked, trying to keep the tremble out of her voice.

Harry's hand felt its way up over her hip to her waist. He gave it a squeeze. "Waiting for you," he said, his voice barely audible.

Ginny closed her eyes and felt for his shoulders as he began to kiss along her jaw, working his way from one ear to the other. Every soft press of his mouth sent a deep, perfect jolt straight through her. It was so hard to believe that he was kissing her like this. Hard to believe that Harry was paying her such total, intimate attention—it was too heady a rush. It was too much to absorb. She threw back her head and slid her hands down his bare back, making him press closer to her. She hardly even heard the soft *pop!* that sounded across the room, near the door.

She did, however, hear the shocked gasp that followed it, and then a second *pop!*

She and Harry froze together and held their breath. There was obviously no one in the room now... but there had been. And they both knew it.

"Was..." Harry's voice was faint with horror. "Was that Hermione?"

"I didn't see," Ginny whispered.

"But..."

Ginny nodded her head beside his, and wondered why she wasn't more embarrassed. "Probably. It sounded like her."

Harry groaned, rolled off of her, and sat up. "Oh *no*—"

"Harry, it's not a big deal," Ginny said comfortingly, sitting up beside him. "It was only a second. And you said you walked in on them the other day—"

"Yeah, but not like *this*," Harry sat up and blinked around, very red in the face. "At least they had all their clothes on—where are my glasses?"

Ginny got them from the bedside table and handed them to him. He slid them onto his nose and his eyes came into focus, fully mortified.

"I'm really sorry," he said.

"Don't be," Ginny answered for the second time that morning. She smoothed his hair, which was completely out of control, and leaned over to kiss him quickly on the mouth. "It's not like she doesn't know... you know. What goes on."

Harry went even redder, but he nodded.

"You'll... still come by tonight, won't you?"

Harry's eyebrows shot up. "Of course," he said, as if there were certain things one simply didn't give up, no matter the consequences. Ginny was pleased to know that she was one of them. "But you never said what time you'd be finished."

Ginny squinted at the clock. It was nearly eleven. "I don't know—six-ish?" she said. "Is that all right?"

"Yeah, that's great."

They looked at each other, both recognizing that something profound had just been rather casually arranged, and then Harry reached out and traced his fingertips down the side of Ginny's face.

She closed her eyes and leaned her cheek into his hand.

"You're..." Harry softly cleared his throat. "You're so lovely," he said, and his voice was still hoarse. "Really."

The words shivered through her as deeply as any touch—he'd never told her that before. She opened her eyes to see his face, but was struck suddenly very shy and had to look away over his shoulder.

"Thank you," she managed.

"See you at six, then."

"Yes."

Harry's fingers reluctantly slipped from her face; he got out of her bed and picked up his wand.

"See you," he repeated, and then, very awkwardly—"Should I—I don't know—bring anything?" He blushed as soon as the words were out and looked like he wanted to throw himself off a very high broomstick.

"Just you," Ginny whispered. She could take care of the rest of it on her own.

Harry looked slightly less suicidal. "All right," he said, sounding relieved. "Bye."

"Bye."

He Disapparated, leaving Ginny in her bed to hug herself and imagine... unimaginable things.

A soft knock at the door interrupted her fantasies, but she didn't mind. They wouldn't be fantasies for long. "Come in," Ginny called, and flicked her wand in the direction of the door, unlocking it.

Hermione came into the room looking very apologetic. She fidgeted in the doorway for a moment as if not sure whether to admit what she had seen.

"We know you were here," Ginny said, laughing. "Try not to make such a noise next time."

"I'm so sorry!" Hermione exclaimed, pink-faced, putting her hands to her cheeks for a moment, and then waving them about. "I just assumed—I mean, it was eleven—I thought you'd have class, and I'd been up for hours, and I just wanted to get some clothes and..." Her voice trailed off and she glanced briefly at Ginny's legs, which were only very barely covered. She pinkened again, looked away, and reached out to close the door behind her. "I'm really sorry," she repeated. "I... hope I didn't interrupt..."

"We weren't," Ginny said quickly. "We haven't yet."

Whole sentences and specific words were apparently unnecessary. Hermione looked very relieved, and then she peered at Ginny as if she didn't quite believe her. "Haven't you?" she asked keenly.

"No."

"Oh."

Ginny felt suddenly flustered. "Why, do I seem like I have, or something?"

Hermione shrugged. She studied Ginny closely. "You seem..." She shrugged again. "You're looking very..." Her eyes flitted over Ginny's tousled, half-dressed state. "I don't know, I suppose I was just very *total* about it."

"Total?" Ginny frowned.

"Yes. I hardly let Ron do... well... anything. Before we did everything. Except once, but that doesn't count, because I was leaving and it was very emotional."

Ginny stared at Hermione. "Doesn't count?" she repeated.

"Well, you know what I mean." Hermione went to her dresser, started taking clothes out of it, and piled them up on a chair.

Ginny wasn't sure she knew what Hermione was talking about. But she was willing to survive without the details of Ron's private life, though it didn't seem quite fair that it had to be Ron, really. Hermione was the only girl she could talk to about any of this. Perhaps if she really tried, Ginny thought, she could forget it was her brother on the other end of everything Hermione was saying.

"Hermione?"

"Hm." Hermione was holding up a soft green, long-sleeved T-shirt with white dragons embossed on the arms. "I never wear this," she mused. "I don't even know where I got this—do you want it?"

Ginny had always liked that top. "Yeah—thanks," she said, and Hermione tossed it onto Ginny's dresser. "But... Hermione?"

"Mm-hmm?"

"What's it... like?"

Hermione paused in the middle of folding a pair of jeans, and looked over at Ginny as if she didn't know what to say. "I..." she began. "It's..."

Ginny decided to narrow it down. "Is there anything I should *know*?"

Hermione peered closely at her again. She opened her mouth as if she wanted to ask something, then shook her head and went back to folding. "It's none of my business," she muttered, a little too loudly.

"No, say what you were going to say."

Hermione threw the jeans in the pile and turned on Ginny with her hands on her hips. "Well, I know you're in love with him, so I'm not going to bother asking if you're ready," she said. "But do you know the proper charms?"

"Prevention charms, you mean?"

"Yes."

Ginny laughed. "Of course, my mum taught me—she made sure I knew them *all*. Which is funny, when you think about it."

Hermione's pressed her lips closed on a smile.

"No, go on. It's funny. I mean—seven of us, it's not like she took her own advice, is it?"

Hermione giggled. "Remember when she told us how she tried that love charm?"

"Yes—did you ever try it?"

"No! Of course not." Hermione tilted her head. "Did you?"

"I was going to," Ginny admitted. "But I was afraid it would work, and then I'd have to spend my whole life knowing that Harry didn't really love me, and it was just a charm."

"Oh, Ginny." Hermione looked fondly at her. "Are you... About Harry... I mean, I know you two must have decided..."

"Just don't come in here tonight," Ginny said, cutting short the rest of Hermione's awkward question. "Or tomorrow morning. Get everything you need. And don't come into Harry's room at the Notch, either, because I don't know what's going to happen—and *don't* let Ron come looking for either of us, *please*. Unless it's literally life or death, and even then, just stay out."

Hermione laughed. "Okay," she said. "It's so... strange."

"What is?"

"I don't know. Thinking of *Harry*. I know it's the same for you about Ron. And it's just a shame, because I don't really have anyone else to talk to about this sort of thing and perhaps it's not really ladylike to discuss it, but sometimes I just want to see if you've done the same... I don't know."

Ginny knew. "I was just thinking the same thing," she said honestly. "I was thinking I could try to forget it was Ron, if you wanted to tell me anything."

"Really?" Hermione's eyes lit up as though Ginny had just suggested they work on an Arithmancy project together. "Well... what are you doing today? I'm going to visit my parents, but they're in therapy until three, so I'm free until then. Do you have school?"

"I don't know. I need to ask Remus."

"He's not even awake. Do you need to study for your N.E.W.T.s?"

"Yes... but I've been good about that, I can skive off."

Hermione frowned at her, but then her eyes lit up again. "Oh, do you know what we should do!"

"What?"

"Remember that magazine with the quiz? We never did it all the way through, did we? Did you keep it?"

Ginny thought she had, somewhere. She flicked her wand and Summoned it, and it came flying out from underneath her bed, sending balls of dust in every direction.

"Let's both take it," Hermione said, grabbing it out of the air and fairly jumping onto her own bed. "And let's do our nails like last time, while we're at it. Mine look horrible."

Nails. Ginny hadn't even thought about them. And her hair, and... everything. She wanted to be perfect, and she had hours. She knew it didn't *really* matter how her nails looked... but it would be one less thing to worry about. Not that she was worried. She wondered why she wasn't.

"Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"Were you nervous?"

"Yes. That's normal."

So then she wasn't normal. But neither was Harry. And what they had together wasn't normal either, she thought, as her heart throbbed twice at once at the memory of what his skin felt like

under her hands. What they had was tremendously rare.

"Number one," Hermione said, and then she laughed. "No. Number *nine*. Have you ever..."

And Hermione asked a question that made Ginny blush to the roots of her hair before she gave her shaky answer.

"Er... not... yet..."

Perhaps she was a little nervous, after all.

* * * * *

Harry arrived at Lupin Lodge at six o'clock. He had showered. He was terrified. He had told himself all day that he was probably assuming too much, and that what she wanted was probably very different from what he was thinking, and that there was no reason for him to work himself up like this—but it was no use. He couldn't get Ginny out of his head. Hanging around Ron, to whom he could say nothing, had been far too difficult, and so he had finally gone up to the dragon camp and tried to help Charlie and Mick disassemble some of the tents. They had told him he was insane, and refused to allow him to do anything. But they hadn't realized that he wasn't doing it out of the goodness of his heart—he needed something to *do*.

Harry had finally ended up at the Ministry, where he had turned in his badge and had an extremely uncomfortable couple of minutes alone with Mr. Weasley, who surely knew everything. Who had probably been able to *tell*, somehow. Harry could have sworn that Ginny's dad had given him more than one all-too-perceptive sort of look. He had nearly run from the office at his first opportunity.

He was being an idiot.

There were very few lights on in Lupin Lodge. Harry found Remus sitting alone in the front room, with a book in one hand and a teacup in the other.

"Would you like a cup of tea, Harry?" Remus asked, when he saw him there.

Harry would very much have liked one. It would have calmed his nerves. "Er—no thanks," he said. "Have you seen Ginny?"

He could have sworn that Remus smirked.

"She said she was going for a walk," Remus answered. "And then she went out back to the garden. I think she may be checking on her Herbology plot—have you seen it? I don't think she'll have a problem earning that N.E.W.T."

"No, I haven't," said Harry. "I'll go and have a look." He wheeled around and nearly dashed out the back door, and as he shut the door behind him, he *knew* that he had heard Remus laugh.

The late-afternoon light was wonderful, coppery-gold; it lit the garden in a range of amber hues, making everything shine. Harry looked around at the different herbs and flowers, and dimly realized just how much work Ginny had done this year, all on her own. He'd had a whole class full of people to help him study, in his seventh year, and she'd only had herself to rely on. Yet she had done a beautiful job—at least with Herbology. And with... other things.

"Harry!"

He looked left and saw her, standing at the edge of the garden among all the growing things, looking radiant in the golden light. She'd left her hair down. He liked it.

Harry walked over to her and extended his hand. Ginny slipped hers into it. They stood for a moment, still and quiet, just looking at each other.

It was... strange. Just looking. Harry felt almost as though he shouldn't have been allowed to look for quite so long. There should have been some excuse for it. He was used to glancing at her when she wasn't watching, and then looking away when she caught him. But this was different. This was... open.

"Did you do this whole garden on your own?" he asked, and was surprised by how low his voice was.

"Oh no. Remus did more than half."

"Well it all looks brilliant."

Ginny beamed. "I worked on it a bit today," she said. "I should really be spending more time on Arithmancy than on this, but I know I'm never going to get that N.E.W.T." She sighed. "I'll be lucky if I get five, honestly."

"I bet you get nine."

"Why, how many did you get?"

"Nine."

Ginny smiled a little and squeezed his hand. "Nine would be good," she said. "Do you want to have a walk with me?"

Harry wanted to have a lot of things with her. He nodded, and she led him off down the path, away from the garden and towards the woods.

"Isn't this beautiful?" Ginny asked quietly, as they walked in among the tall trees. Great shafts of orange light came down between them, dappling the ground and shadowing them both in light and darkness. "I love it back here."

"I haven't come back here that often, to be honest," Harry said, looking around. It *was* beautiful.

Ginny looked around with reverent eyes. "I've never seen it like this," she said. "This is my favorite time of day. My favorite light."

Harry wasn't sure why he liked it so much that she had a favorite light. But he did.

They walked a little further down the path, listening to the creatures of the forest, which sounded, for the most part, to be friendly.

"What did you do today?" Ginny asked, stepping carefully over a little stream.

Harry followed, equally careful. "I turned in my badge. I'm not a Ministry employee anymore." He got his footing again and was surprised to be pulled immediately into a tight, possessive hug.

"Good," Ginny whispered.

He closed his eyes and held her just as tightly. It was good. It was *over*. He had never been so thoroughly uplifted—it was all beyond him. He was in the woods, in Ginny's arms, and he had no responsibility. Even if another one came his way tomorrow—and it wouldn't have surprised him—for tonight there was only this. Only her.

He wondered what she really thought of him crying all over the place. He still couldn't believe he had done it. He tried to push it out of his memory.

"What's wrong?" she mumbled.

Damn.

"Nothing?" he tried, but he knew it wouldn't work.

Ginny pulled away and gazed at him, her eyes full of affection. "All right, Harry," she said quietly. "Only tell me if you want to. I won't sense." She took his hand again and Harry rubbed his thumb over the back of it.

"What are you going to do, now that you're finished with school?" he asked.

"Oh... everything." Ginny laughed. "There are a lot of things that need doing."

Harry nodded. "What first, then?"

"First I want to spend time with Neville's parents," she said unhesitatingly. "I want to see what I can do for them."

Harry pulled a hanging branch out of Ginny's way, and gently guided her forward. Together, they continued to walk, as the golden light around them began to fade.

"It doesn't last long, does it?" Harry mused aloud, looking around.

"No," Ginny looked up. "But that's part of what makes it so beautiful. It's sort of... fragile. You can't keep it for long."

"I don't think that makes it beautiful," Harry said without thinking. "It makes it sad. It's not right that you can't keep it."

Ginny looked over at him. And then she picked up his hand and surprised him by kissing it. "It always comes back tomorrow, Harry," she said, very gently. "It's not gone forever."

Harry wasn't sure what they were really talking about.

They came to the edge of the wood, where a stretch of long, soft-looking grassy banks spread towards the shore of the small lake. Sunset light shimmered on the water, made fires in the crags of rocks, and illuminated snakes of sand. Harry looked out into the reddening sky, where the sun was setting beyond the trees on the other side of the lake. He took a deep breath.

"Look," Ginny murmured. "Look at the moon." It had already risen, half-full. It hung halfway up in the burning sky, over the lake that reflected all the golds and reds of the setting sun. So did Ginny's face, which was tilted up and caught the light. "It's a Gryffindor sunset, isn't it?" she asked.

"Definitely," Harry said absently. He wasn't looking at it anymore. His eyes followed the contours of her lips, and the way they picked up the ruddy light. "Definitely," he said again, and turned her towards him by her hand.

Ginny looked right into his face as he touched her shoulders. He moved his hands up and down her arms a few times, feeling something soft and scratchy on the fabric of her shirt. He looked down at what it was and saw that there were dragons on her sleeves.

"That's cool," Harry said, running a fingertip down her arm, along the spiky spine of one long dragon. "Glad I don't have to ride one anymore, though."

Ginny laughed. She had a really good laugh. He didn't really know why she thought he was funny, but he was pleased that she did. He pulled her towards him, rested his forehead against hers, and shut his eyes "Do you want to turn around and walk back?" he asked, after awhile.

"Not really. You?"

"No."

Ginny pulled away and looked right at him again, and there was something in her eyes that drove a spike of heat straight through Harry, making him sweat.

Without taking her eyes off him, Ginny dropped down to sit in the grass. She tugged Harry's trouser leg. "Sit with me."

He did, arranging himself just behind her so that she could sit between his legs and lean back against him. Harry held her around the middle and brushed her hair back towards him. He then carefully put all of her hair over the front of her right shoulder, and rested his chin on her left.

"Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you really think I'm lovely?"

Harry blinked. Didn't she know she was? "Yes."

She was quiet for a minute. "Harry?"

"Mm-hmm?"

"I love you."

Harry's heart stopped. A buzzing warmth began in his eardrums; it spread through his head and down his neck. His stomach tightened. Would he ever get used to hearing it? Would it ever lose its impact? He didn't think so.

"You knew I... talked about you all the time, when we were little," she said softly. "My brothers told you. I'm sure Riddle told you too—or didn't he? I've always wondered."

Harry worked his mouth and tried to unstick his throat. He was very glad not to have to look at her face. "Yes. He did."

"He said he would." She was very quiet for a time. "You thought I was just star struck by you, didn't you?"

Harry thought about it. Had he thought her star struck? No... it had been something else entirely. He'd known that she was taken with him; that much had been clear. But he had never equated her with the people who had stopped him in the street or stared at his scar. She had watched him in a different way; it had given him a different feeling. It had never been uncomfortable. Perhaps a bit strange at first... but in a nice way.

"Never mind answering; I know you did. And I *was* star struck, a little." Ginny's voice was soft and clear. "I think I still am. Sometimes I catch myself staring at your forehead and thinking no, he didn't do those things, that's all too much for one person."

The tightness in Harry's stomach moved up into his chest as Ginny settled back into him. She rested her forearms on his thighs and dangled her hands on his knees.

"You're so real, Harry."

Ginny's stomach rose and fell under Harry's hands and he watched the sliver of her profile that he could see, lit by the moon.

"This was never Empathy."

He blinked hard and rested his forehead on her shoulder. The tightness was in his throat now. He didn't want to cry again—once in a day was enough. Once in a lifetime was enough.

"I'll tell you how I'm sure," Ginny went on. "It wasn't really fair of me to get so angry with you for asking when I wondered too, at first." She rubbed his knees. "First, I know what woke me up. My gift, I mean. Riddle's diary did it."

Harry nodded a little against her shoulder.

"But I noticed you before that, Harry. I couldn't get you out of my head from the second I saw you at platform nine and three-quarters. Ron wasn't lying when he said I never shut up about you all summer. And he only heard it for the summer—I'd been tormenting Mum all year, asking questions and making up story futures for us and..." Her hands stopped moving in his knees and heat radiated from her neck. "I'm saying far too much," she mumbled.

"No you're not." Harry tightened his arms around her. She was saying what he had needed to hear, and he had needed to hear it all year and all his life. No one had ever told him exactly how they loved him before.

"Well then, the other thing was *Expecto Sacrificum*," Ginny laughed and her back moved against him; Harry lifted his head and stole another look at her profile. "I told you I loved you in front of all those *people*. That was so hard." She put her hands over his and held them to her. "And that spell

never would've worked if I hadn't meant it. I thought you'd work that out, but you didn't—and then you made me so angry—I couldn't believe you thought I'd go with Malfoy—

"I never thought that," Harry interrupted.

Ginny turned her face so that her cheek leaned on his chest, and craned her neck to look up at him. "You didn't?"

He shook his head. "Not really."

She held his gaze for a minute. "You have the best eyes."

The buzzing started up again in Harry's head, hotter and louder this time. He couldn't believe she was saying all this. He didn't know how she just... said this stuff.

"And I really do think you're brilliant. You were brilliant yesterday."

"So were you." Harry paused. "And I wasn't any better than anyone else—it was Adam who really took the risk, in the end."

Ginny sighed inaudibly; he only felt the swell of breath beneath his hands. "What does that matter?" she asked. "Do you think I'm looking for you to be better than everyone?" She turned a little and looked at him. "You're finished with all that, Harry—you've proved yourself—you're the most *amazing* man—" She stopped. She looked a little embarrassed, as though she thought she'd got too carried away again.

But Harry wanted her to go on. He wrapped his arms tighter around her.

"And you're so *modest*," she blurted. "It only makes you greater. You could be such a git—you could brag and strut about, and you'd be well within your rights, but you don't—and you don't have to, because it's so clear what you are, it speaks for itself—you have no idea what that does to me—" She stopped again, and blushed, and turned away.

Harry knew his face was red too, but he had to hear the rest of this ramble. It was too good. He remembered Ron once telling him that Ginny hadn't shut up about him all summer, but Harry had never known exactly what kinds of things she'd said. He wanted to hear it all, uncensored. "What... does it... do to you?" he managed.

Ginny laughed a little. "I don't know—it's just the way you..."

"What?" he asked again, in a very quiet voice.

"I don't know." She shifted uncomfortably in his arms, and rocked forward a little, away from him.

She was upset. He wasn't sure why. "What's wrong?" he asked.

She jumped, and turned to give him a very wary look. "How did you know something was?" she demanded.

Harry couldn't stop a grin. "I just know you," he said, happy to have got it right. "Go on—tell me what's wrong."

She looked deeply unsettled. "I'm worried you're going to think I'm stupid if I keep this up," she said. "I don't want to go on gushing like this and have you think I'm some silly little girl."

Harry's eyebrows shot up. "I could never think you're stupid," he said honestly. "And I want you to tell me all this stuff."

Ginny didn't look convinced. She turned away again and looked out at the lake. The sun had set, and the sky had gone purple; Harry looked up and followed the pattern of the evening's first stars. It was a beautiful night.

"When I was little," Ginny said, so faintly that Harry had to lean forward to hear her, "everyone teased me about you. Except you. You were kind."

Harry was very grateful to his younger self for not making any stupid moves on that score.

"I thought you were..." She shook her head. "Perfect. I remember sitting in corners, watching you do things."

What things? Harry wanted to ask.

"Anything," Ginny answered. "It didn't matter. You'd unfold your napkin or open a book and I'd think, no one could look more wonderful doing that, no one could look more brave."

Harry tried to picture himself bravely opening a book. It wasn't much of an image.

"And you didn't seem to realize how brilliant you were. You were so quiet and polite. Like you weren't a hero at all, which only made you more of one. You were *Harry Potter*, but you weren't at all—you were just this handsome boy who came to my house one summer in clothes worse than mine, and ran round with my brothers, and flew my dad's car into a tree..." Ginny's voice trailed away. "See?" she said, shaking her head. "Listen to me, I'm so *childish*—"

"No, you're not," Harry cut in quickly, feeling dazed. "Did you... did you really think I was handsome when we were that young?"

Ginny glanced back at him, still looking uncertain. "I've always thought you were gorgeous," she said.

Harry knew he was no such thing. "No I'm not," he said slowly. "Especially not then—I was skinny and I... I still have these glasses—"

"I love your glasses," Ginny burst out vehemently, and even in the moonlight, she turned quite red.

Now Harry was completely lost. "Why?" he asked.

"I don't know!" Ginny sounded just as lost. But she was turning to face him now, and he tucked one of his legs back to give her more room. "I can't explain it—they're just—they're *yours*. And I like the way they make you look, they're—they're really—they're—" She seemed to be struggling. "Sexy," she finally mumbled, and now she was so scarlet that she radiated heat.

Harry was floored. "Really?" His voice cracked on the word.

Ginny could only nod. She sat back on her heels and looked down at her knees.

"Well so—" Harry stammered. "So are *you*. I mean—your hair and—your—everything."

She looked up at him, clearly shocked. "Am I?" she whispered.

"Oh yeah."

They gazed at each other, both flushed and self-conscious, Ginny's hair slipping forward along her cheek and her eyes following a path to his mouth until Harry couldn't stand it for another second. It was like watching a Snitch flutter past and not reaching out to grab it.

He dove.

Ginny made a high-pitched noise that was somewhere between pain and pleasure, and Harry wasn't sure what he'd done until they both thudded into the soft grass and she fell on her back beneath him with a gasp. He'd practically attacked her. He wondered if he should stop. But she didn't seem to care—she wrapped her arms around him and threw back her head as he kissed her feverishly all over her face. He didn't know what he was doing. He had lost his mind.

"*Harry*—" she managed, in a voice that made him love the sound of his name. He wanted to hear it again. "Yes—"

Harry could hear the unstable breaths she was taking, and he didn't miss the snuffle that followed them.

"Is this happening?" she mumbled, so faintly that he almost couldn't understand her.

"Yes," he gasped, though he could hardly believe it. He slammed his mouth to hers and she shouted into him. It felt like victory. It felt like *triumph*. Was this happening? Was this going to happen? She'd said, at Christmas, that she wanted to wait. Had they waited?

And could they really do this *here*?

Harry paused, panting, and tried to pull back.

"No," Ginny said breathlessly, taking his face in her hands and reaching up her chin to kiss him again. "Please, Harry—"

He kissed her back, long and hard, and then he pulled away again and held himself up on his hands, staring down at her and trying to talk himself out of what he wanted. They couldn't possibly do this here. Even though the night was cool and comfortable, and she was beautiful in it, staring up at him from her bed of grass, her mouth wet, her eyes glazed and full of starlight. Even though he knew he'd go insane if he ignored the thudding in his body for one more second. She was amazing. She wouldn't want this—not here, like this. She was too good for him. She deserved romance. And furniture.

"Should we go inside?" he rasped.

She shook her head.

"Are you sure?" his voice cracked again. "You really want to stay out here? You're not cold, you wouldn't rather—"

"I'm fine," she said, her voice strangely soft. "But we could go back to the Notch or Lupin Lodge, and charm the walls if you'd rather."

Harry tried to imagine touching her and knowing that Remus was somewhere in the house. Or Ron. He shook his head.

Ginny pulled her wand. Without even sitting up, she held her arm out to the side, swished and flicked.

"*Appara Vestis!*"

Harry watched in a kind of half-shock as a dark green quilt appeared on the ground beside them. He recognized it from the linen cupboard at Lupin Lodge. He looked slowly back down at Ginny, who tossed her wand into the grass and looked up at him, breathing hard.

"Is that all right?" she said. But her voice was shaking. "Can we stay here? I want to stay here."

Harry nodded. He got to his knees and helped her move over to the blanket. And when he laid her down this time, he did it... gently. She was trembling all over.

Or perhaps it was him.

"I'm nervous," she whispered, when he stretched out beside her. "Are you?"

Harry wasn't sure he was supposed to admit it. But he nodded.

"Kiss me?" she whispered.

Harry did, with all the love he felt. He murmured her name and she sniffled again and brushed the backs of her fingers down the side of his face.

For a long time, there was no talking between them. And then there was nothing between them at all, and Harry paused, unable to believe that she could really look at all of him and still agree to take him as he was, pale and skinny and flawed, and be with him like this.

"You're sure?" he asked, very quietly.

Ginny said nothing. Instead, she slowly reached up her hand—hesitated for a moment—then did something he couldn't have anticipated. She twined her fingers into his hair, pulled his forehead to her mouth, and gently—gently—kissed his scar.

"You are the only man," she whispered, "that I am ever, ever going to love."

It wasn't long before the world as Harry knew it ceased to exist.

* * * * *

Ron had never been unable to eat his mother's cooking before. She had made all of his favorites, along with everyone else's, but the fried chicken tasted like a corned beef sandwich and he almost gagged trying to get it down. Finally, he threw half a drumstick on the plate in frustration, and looked around at everyone.

"How can you all just sit there and... *eat*?" he demanded.

Fred stood up. "This better?"

Everyone else laughed, but Ron only scowled; this was nothing to *joke* about. He excused himself from the table and paced maniacally around the garden of the Burrow. A gnome, smelling the garden banquet, stuck its ugly head out of the ground, and Ron picked it up and threw it so hard over the hedge that Adam and all the other children cheered.

"Maybe you should just go over there now and volunteer to be a Chaser, Ron," said Charlie.

"Ha ha," said Ron. Charlie had certainly been a lot happier these past few weeks. He wasn't going to be returning to Romania. He and Cho Chang were looking very cozy together, and whenever Charlie talked about his newest mad idea—running a stable for abandoned dragons off the coast of Wales, near Culparrat—Cho joined in the conversation as though it were understood that she was going with him.

"Ron, you've hardly touched your dinner," his mother rebuked. "And I'll thank you to remember that this lunch is not about the Chudley Cannons, it's about your father's re-election. Now, show him some respect and finish your chicken."

"It's Poultry Respectfulness Day, Ron," said George.

"Yeah," said Fred. "By the order of the Minister."

Everyone except Ron laughed again, and his father motioned for him to take his seat.

"I understand how you feel, son," he said. "You're going to need your energy to cheer on the Cannons—but if you're not going to eat that, give it here."

Ron passed his father the uneaten drumstick and sat down again next to Hermione, who was wearing his old Cannons shirt. At least *she* loved him. He hadn't even had to ask her to wear it. She had just understood that certain things were important—but then, she had always been a clever girl.

"I can't believe Bill's in *France*," Adam complained. He was also picking at his dinner. "Missing this. Couldn't he wait a few more days?"

Ron wholeheartedly agreed that his eldest brother was completely mad. "He's the one who gave me my first Cannons poster," he told Adam. "I assumed he'd understand what a *moment* this is in the history of the *team*—no one *understands*—"

Hermione slipped her arm around him. "I understand, Ron," she said.

Ron pulled her closer and narrowly glanced at Harry, who professed to be a Cannons fan, and yet had turned down a spot on the team and was now on his third piece of roast beef.

"I understand that you're *insane*," Hermione added after a moment. Harry snickered.

Ron shrugged Hermione away from him and crossed his arms. Fiancée or not, she was in the

doghouse until she did some serious cheering for the Cannons—they *all* were.

At least they were dressed for it, though, Ron thought, looking around the table. His father was wearing a modest Chudley Cannons sash across his robes—"Because I shouldn't really show favoritism, Ron." His mother wore black robes with orange sleeves that she'd stitched on that morning. Everyone else was wearing either Cannons T-shirts or orange hats, except Angelina, who was wearing her Montrose Magpies shirt and didn't seem to care if it was wrong.

"They're not playing the Magpies," she said, waving a dismissive hand. "It's not like I'm cheering for the enemy."

"It doesn't matter," Fred said, holding out his spare Cannons shirt. "You'll be happier if you wear this, trust me."

Angelina shook her head. "No, I'm dressed, thanks. And I think you're taking this a *bit* seriously—"

Ron gave a cry of pure frustration, and Leo, who had been rocking back and forth in mid-air and sleeping peacefully, woke up and started wailing.

"Sorry," Ron muttered, when both Penelope and his mother shot him looks.

"Ron, it's *two hours* till the match," Ginny said, looking at her watch. "Just *go* if you're so eager to be there, and stop annoying every—OW!"

Ron had leaned back, reached out a long arm and snapped Ginny hard on the shoulder. She gave him a very dirty look. Harry looked as though he were torn between laughing and punching Ron, but in the end, he just reached for another slice of roast beef.

"I think I *will* go!" Ron said, standing up again. He knew he'd be better off at the stadium with the other real fans; he was just going to lose his mind if he had to stay here. "Dad, can I have my ticket, please?"

"Wait, Ron, I've made pies," said his mother. "Chocolate, lemon-meringue, and pumpkin—it's your favorite!"

Ron knew it was cruel, but desperate times called for desperate measures. His mother had bombarded him with maroon sweaters and corned beef and pumpkin pie his whole life, just because he had expressed an interest in them at the age of three. He had to draw the line.

"Mum," he said, "I... think pumpkin pie is disgusting." His mother's jaw dropped. "Not just yours—*everyone's*. But I'll eat a piece of the chocolate after the Cannons win!" he added quickly.

"I'll go with you," said Harry, finishing his last bite and standing. Ron was surprised, but pleased. It had been difficult to tear Harry away from Ginny these past few weeks, and although Ron could certainly understand, he wanted his best friend back for this momentous event. Once they got there, he knew Harry would get into the spirit of it. It was Quidditch, after all.

"Right," said Ron, taking two tickets from his father and handing one to Harry. "See you lot there."

* * * * *

The security outside the Quidditch stadium was unlike anything Harry had ever seen, which struck him as odd; the security hadn't been like this at the World Cup, in his fourth year, and that had been an international event. Perhaps the after-effects of war had made everyone especially paranoid. Wizards from the M.L.E.S. guarded the stadium entrance, looking grim and running their wands over everyone who entered, and it took a very long time to get inside. The longer they had to wait, the edgier Ron became, until Harry had to ask him to stop leaning up to check the front of the line every five seconds, because it was making him nervous.

"Are you carrying any cannonballs, hammers, pieces of old metal pipe, or any other objects that might be used to break heads?" asked the Enforcer who was running his wand over Ron.

"No, we're supporting the Cannons!" Ron protested, as the Enforcer ran a wand across his shoes one more time.

"Have you left your cloaks or bags unattended at any time?"

"We're not wearing any," Ron pointed out irritably. "Are you finished—"

"Has anyone *else* asked you to carry any cannonballs, hammers, pieces of old metal pipe, or any other objects that might be used to break heads?"

"Yeah," Ron said sarcastically. "And we're a couple of prats with candy floss for brains, so we decided it would be clever to say yes—"

Ron was immediately led to the side by two very large guards, sharply questioned, and was only released when Harry approached and was recognized.

"What's the *problem*?" Ron hissed, rubbing his wrists where the guards had grabbed them.

"The Falcons fans take their motto very seriously," growled one of the guards. "We're not having

any unnecessary injuries at this game. All jokes at the gates are to be treated as threats to security."

"Paranoid much?" Ron muttered.

Harry dragged Ron away before he could say anything that would get them kicked out. When they finally entered the stadium, Ron hustled Harry past the food, muttering something about people who could be hungry at a time like this, and past all the bright-orange Cannons merchandise glittering in the sunlight. "I've got all the merchandise I need," he said, and patted his pocket. "This money's for Butterbeer."

They emerged onto the first bleachers and started to climb—Mr. Weasley, being Minister of Magic, was able to use the entire top box.

Harry was surprised to see so many people already at the stadium. Ron wasn't the only super-fanatical Cannons fan. There was still an hour and a half until the game started, and already the people in the seats created such an enormous, bright orange blur that it almost hurt Harry's eyes to look at them.

"Isn't it beautiful?" said Ron, putting a hand over his eyes and staring upwards. "The Cannons haven't been in a League Championship since 1892. And today... finally... all the *loyal* fans will be rewarded." His eyes looked glassy. "It's an honor to be here," he said. "An honor."

Harry would have snickered at Ron's somber tone if he hadn't been almost as excited. He had never been a big Cannons fan until this year, but there was something fantastic about seeing the underdogs rise to the top, Quidditch matches were nearly always a good time, and championships were always exceptionally cool. He found himself trying to hurry to get up to their seats.

About halfway up, someone waved, and Harry saw that it was Mr. Gladrag. He hurried towards them with his wife, as glamorous as ever, who was dressed in a long, sleeveless robe of brilliant orange, with little cannonballs zooming all around on the fabric.

"Like it?" asked Mr. Gladrag, looking at his young wife with obvious pride. When Harry and Ron both nodded, he looked pleased.

"We can make them to order for your young ladies, if you like," he offered. "Special discount—just for you two."

Harry tried to imagine Ginny wearing such a dress, but the Ginny in his head kept laughing at herself. He thought that Ron might be trying to see Hermione in his head as well, because he let out a loud snort that he quickly turned into a cough. Then he politely thanked Mr. Gladrag, and they continued up the stairs.

When they reached the box, which was bedecked with orange and black sparklers and streamers despite Mr. Weasley's protestations about "neutrality," Ron sat down right in the middle of the front row and pulled out his Omnioculars.

"You've still got those?" Harry asked.

"Best present you ever gave me," Ron said graciously, and tipped his old Cannons hat at Harry. "This is the second best." Ron, whose face had been unusually pale all morning, turned a bit pink, and looked away. Harry remembered how upset Ron had been, when he'd discovered that the gold with which he'd paid Harry back for the Omnioculars at the Quidditch World Cup had been leprechaun gold and had vanished into thin air several hours later. It seemed so long ago.

A young wizard wearing several flashing buttons on his robes and a plain hat that just said "QUIDDITCH" on it in plain lettering, came around selling bottles of Bottomless Butterbeer Extra—"Outlasts the Longest Match!" Ron motioned to him, bought two bottles, and handed one to Harry.

"Now we really are even," he joked, and then turned his attention to the field. Not much was going on.

"Where is everyone?" Harry asked. "Shouldn't they be practicing by now?"

"Fat lot you know," said Ron. "Haven't been paying attention to the season as much as you should. Been doing other, more *important* things, have you?"

Harry pulled the brim of his hat very low, and didn't answer.

"There's a very strict warm-up schedule now—has been ever since Knight was injured before that game that you played."

Just then, there was a loud booing and hissing noise and line of players in dark-gray and white robes flew out onto the field from behind one of the stands. The Falmouth Falcons.

"See," Ron explained to Harry, "they have half an hour to warm up, then they go in and the Cannons come out for half an hour. That way, they're not both on the field at the same time and there's less chance of getting hurt."

Harry watched intently as the Falcons flew back and forth, throwing Quaffles at each other and dodging Bludgers. The Cannons were in for a tough game if this warm-up session was any indication. The two burly Beaters were pelting their own Chasers with Bludgers, and following up

with insults. The Chasers were showing the Keeper no mercy, as Quaffle after Quaffle flew expertly towards the hoops. Whenever the Keeper missed, he caught up with the Quaffle and threw it so hard back at the offending Chaser that Harry kept waiting for one of them to fall off his broom.

"Good to see you've decided to eat, Ron," said Hermione, motioning to the Butterbeer clutched in Ron's hand. She and Ginny had just entered the box, and they took seats on either side of Ron and Harry, and passed them official programs. The programs were thick and shiny, and the cover was divided diagonally into two sections, one orange and one gray. Photographs of the team captains glimmered up from their respective colors; Mulrod McNierney looked frightening, and Oliver looked fierce. Across the front in black lettering the program read: *QLCFGB&I*.

"The Q L C..." Hermione began uncertainly.

"Quidditch League Cup Final of Great Britain and Ireland," Ron said, grabbing his program and holding up his bottle without taking his eyes off the warm up. "Want a drink? They're bottomless."

"Is it just Butterbeer?" Hermione asked warily.

"Yeah." Ron waved a haphazard hand in the air, and the Butterbeer man came back. "Two more, please," Ron said, and passed one to Hermione without incident. But he virtually threw the other bottle at Ginny and leapt from his seat to clutch the railing.

She squealed and held the foaming bottle away from her lap. "*Ron*," she complained.

But Ron was no longer available. The Cannons had flown onto the field. Harry got to his feet and cheered, though he noticed that Ron wasn't shouting like most of the other fans; instead he had gone perfectly still, and there was a look of perfect concentration on his face, as if his personal focus, starting now, would make or break the match.

Harry grinned. If a person was going to get fanatical about something, Quidditch was really the best choice. He turned back to the pitch as Maureen Knight began to practice her dives, and he felt a pang of jealousy. He would have loved to play in a match as important as this. It was something he hadn't let himself think about seriously for a long time, but watching Knight made him itch to be in her place. He could almost feel the wind beating against his own face as she dove again.

"What?" Ron said absently to Hermione. She was barely watching the practice, and instead was reading her program and asking Ron questions about it.

"Maureen Knight is leaving the Cannons," Hermione repeated, looking surprised that Ron didn't already know it.

"What?" said Harry, shocked. "Why?"

"It doesn't say..." mused Hermione. "Oh, wait, it says she's leaving for personal reasons. I wonder if Oliver's been too hard on her?"

Harry pulled his own Omnioculars out of his pocket and focused on the space in the sky where Knight and Wood seemed to be having an intense conversation. From far away, they certainly seemed to be arguing, but up close, they didn't look angry at all. As a matter of fact, they looked like they were trying very hard not to laugh. He recalled that Oliver always launched himself at Knight after she caught the Snitch, and he wondered if there was anything "personal" between them.

"She wouldn't really leave the Cannons when she's doing so well," Harry said, still unconvinced.

"She would," said Ginny, who also had a copy of the guide in her lap. "It says here, 'Maureen Knight will return to the Ballycastle Bats next season, leaving the Chudley Cannons without a Seeker'. Then it lists the best picks for next year's Seeker, and you're at the top of the list."

Harry let go of his Omnioculars and blinked at her. "Am I really?" he asked in surprise. "Can I see?"

Her eyes shining, Ginny showed him the page.

"But... I never said I was going out for Quidditch again."

Ginny leaned closer to him. "That doesn't change the fact that you're the best pick," she said confidently, pushing up his hat brim in order to give him a kiss. Harry shut his eyes and enjoyed it for a moment, though he was almost sure he heard a few flashbulbs pop.

"Harry Potter Takes Advantage of Minister's Daughter in Top Box," Ginny whispered.

Harry snorted. "Harry Potter Drags Minister's Daughter Under Stands and They Miss the Whole Match," he muttered back.

Ginny grinned. "It's not a catchy headline," she said. "But the story could be good." She put her hand on his knee, and Harry covered it with his own, not minding when she knocked his hat back a bit further to kiss him again. It was all right if she wanted to kiss him here. Ron wasn't paying attention anyway, and Hermione didn't care, and the reporters... well. The reporters were going to find them no matter what.

Ginny suddenly broke away and pushed back her hair. "Oh, hi, Dad," she said easily.

Harry untangled himself from her as quickly as if he were kissing an Acromantula. He did not look up at Mr. Weasley, who had just entered the top box with the rest of his family right behind him. All of them were followed by a small group of reporters and photographers; Eloise Midgen and Colin Creevey waved to Harry as the Weasleys took their seats.

"Mr. Weasley!" said a female reporter who pushed her way to the front and jostled Eloise out of the way with her elbow. The reporter looked like she had recently had her nose broken, and her badly-dyed red hair looked sorely out of place next to the throng of Weasleys in the box. Harry noticed that Mr. Weasley looked wary, but he composed himself and indicated that he would answer a question.

"We've heard from a reliable source that Mr. Draco Malfoy plans to sue the Ministry of Magic for abuse and coercion. Care to comment?"

Harry sat upright. This was certainly news to him. Even Ron took his eyes off the Quidditch pitch to stare at the reporters in amazement.

"What's that got to do with Quidditch, Flummery?" Sirius and Remus were fighting through the crowd of people who had gathered outside of the Minister's box.

Harry's insides burned. So *this* was the reporter who had caused so many problems—who had written those awful things about himself and Ginny and Malfoy and Mr. Weasley. A flash bulb went off, and Harry recognized Flummery's partner-in-crime, Crispin R. Peltier. Before he knew what he was doing, Harry stood up and pointed his wand at Peltier's camera.

"*Disolvus*," Harry said sharply, and a great jet of smoke sizzled out of the camera.

"That's illegal!" shouted Peltier, frantically attempting to salvage his film. But it coiled out of the camera in a scorching mess, obviously burnt beyond use.

"So's writing rubbish and lies," Harry said, pointing his wand at Flummery's thick scroll of parchment, which she immediately hid behind her back. "Get out, both of you."

They left, looking furious. Most of the other reporters, obviously unnerved by Harry's ready wand and the sight of Sirius Black glowering at them, hurried back down the bleachers to make it to the press box in time for the beginning of the game. Only Colin and Eloise remained behind.

"I can't believe they still work for the *Prophet*," said Charlie.

"They don't," Eloise replied, clearly very happy about it. "Ever since the article about Malfoy and you, Ginny. They disappeared for a while after that, and then they were sacked for *good*, for failing to show up for work and meet their deadlines. And they've never been able to explain where they were." She shrugged.

"I'm sure Malfoy had them both beaten to a pulp after what they printed about him and me," Ginny said, sounding unconcerned. "And then they must have been Memory Charmed or something. Otherwise we would have heard about it."

"What a shame." Eloise smiled. "Erm, Mr. Weasley, you wouldn't mind my asking a few questions, would you?"

Soon, Eloise was talking with Mr. Weasley and recording his comments with her wand, while Colin leaned over the box to shake Harry's hand.

"Nice move there, with Peltier's camera—just don't ever get angry at me like that, all right?" Colin gave his own camera a protective pat.

"Do you two want to sit in here?" Harry said, pocketing his wand and sitting back down. "There might be room if we—"

"Can't," Colin interrupted regretfully. "Soon as Eloise is done, we have to get back down to where the action is. I just came up to give you this." He handed Harry a photograph.

Harry recognized it. It was of himself and Ginny, and it had been taken the previous summer, in the front garden at Lupin Lodge. He remembered how uncomfortable he'd been then—around everyone—about everything. Especially Ginny. In the photograph, her face was turned away from Harry and she swiped covertly at her eyes. Harry realized with a touch of surprise that she must have been crying. The Harry in the photograph didn't seem aware of that, however; he was too busy slanting sidelong, wistful glances at her blue bathing costume.

Harry knew he was red. He wondered if Colin had somehow... *done*... something to the photograph to alter it—to make it like the ones that were printed in *Charmed Life*. He felt his face grow warm and looked questioningly up at Colin, unable, at first, to meet his eyes.

But Colin just grinned. "I kept it under lock and key until I was sure it was safe to give it to you."

"Cheers," Harry mumbled. Ginny was now leaning over his shoulder and looking at the picture. As she did so, the Ginny in the photograph suddenly turned her face and reached up to touch Harry's cheek—something he was certain she hadn't done at the time. The Harry in the photograph blinked.

"What a lovely picture," said Mrs. Weasley fondly, from behind Ginny. Beside her, Adam and the other boys who lived at the Burrow all sniggered.

Ginny quickly took the photograph out of Harry's hand and tucked it into her pocket. She was blushing. "Thanks, Colin," she said faintly, touching her knee to Harry's. "I don't think I have any of us together."

"Really? Because I got a *great* one up at Azkaban," Colin said. "I was going to submit it to the editor, but then I thought... I don't know. I thought better of it. But I'll send you a copy, if you like."

Harry and Ginny both nodded.

Eloise and Colin left shortly after that, and Mr. Weasley heaved a comfortable sigh. "Very pleasant girl," he said. "Easy to talk to. It's nice to see her career going so well."

"Well, it can't hurt knowing all of us, can it?" asked Fred. "We're a newsworthy lot."

"And in case she doesn't have enough to write about," said George, "we've brought these." Out of the folds of his orange and black robes, he pulled a bright-red box labeled *Weasleys' Ultimate Party Crackers Amaze and Alarm Your Guests!*

"Don't you *dare*—" their mother began.

"But, Mum, this batch was custom made for this very occasion!" George protested. "And they're very safe," he added, grinning widely.

"Only pull those after they win," Ron said. "Don't get us kicked out."

"Ohhh, is ickle Ronniekins nervous?" Fred crooned. "I fink he is..."

But Ron didn't answer. Instead, he suddenly leaned so far over the railing that Harry thought he might fall; both he and Hermione grabbed the back of Ron's bright-orange T-shirt and held onto him.

"It's starting!" Ron said in a hoarse, excited whisper. "Here it comes!"

"*LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!*" boomed the announcer. "*WELCOME TO THE QUIDDITCH LEAGUE CUP FINAL OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND!*"

The cheers that met the announcement were so loud that Harry had to cover his ears. But he jumped up and joined in them beside Ron, who was shouting himself into a frenzy.

"That's Lee, isn't it!" Hermione shouted over the din. "Oh, I hope he's able to be impartial, this is a very important match!"

"*AND HERE THEY ARE, DEFENDING THEIR TITLE AND HOLDING FIRST PLACE IN THE LEAGUE TONIGHT WITH FOUR THOUSAND, TWO HUNDRED AND NINETY POINTS FOR THE SEASON—A ROUND OF APPLAUSE FOR MULROD MCNIERNEY AND THE FALMOUTH FALCONS!*"

Ron immediately stopped cheering, and so did half the crowd. But on the other side of the stadium, there was an eruption of sound and a tremendous fluttering of dark gray banners as the Falcons' names were announced.

"*AND, COMPETING FOR THE CUP TONIGHT, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ONE HUNDRED AND SEVEN YEARS, AND ALSO HOLDING FIRST PLACE IN THE LEAGUE WITH A TIED SCORE OF FOUR THOUSAND, TWO HUNDRED AND NINETY POINTS FOR THE SEASON—PUT YOUR HANDS TOGETHER FOR A BRILLIANT MADMAN AND HIS EXCELLENT TEAM—OLIVER WOOD AND THE CHUDLEY CANNONS!*"

The stands shook with such a noise of screams and feet stamping that Harry was temporarily deafened. But he shouted as loud as the rest of them, stomped his feet, and banged his open hands on the railing. Angelina hurled what looked like a giant orange into the air—it exploded twenty feet up and rained down a shower of orange and black confetti that seemed to be alive; it fluttered down around them like thousands of tiny butterflies and got into everyone's collars and hair. It was lovely, and it tickled, and Harry laughed out loud in honest delight.

"Oh, are there more of those?" Ginny asked, turning around. "They're great—whose idea?"

"Mine," Angelina said, grinning and passing out the huge oranges to everyone.

"*TO RELEASE THE OFFICIAL GAME BALLS, WE WOULD LIKE TO ASK THE HELP OF A YOUNG MAN YOU'VE ALL HEARD OF—UNLESS YOU'VE BEEN LIVING ON ANOTHER PLANET—WE KNOW HE'S IN THE STANDS TONIGHT—*"

Harry felt a stab of apprehension—he didn't want to go down there. He glanced at Ron and Hermione, neither of whom looked surprised, and then at Ginny, who gave him an apologetic look and a bracing pat on the arm.

"*WILL MR. ADAM HOPEWELL PLEASE COME DOWN TO THE PITCH!*"

There was one massive, unbelievable shout of approval from both the Cannons and the Falcons fans.

Harry was too startled to join in the cheers. That hadn't been his name at all. A rush of impossible warmth swept through him as he turned around with the rest of the gaping Weasleys to look at Adam. Perhaps the world had moved on... to someone else.

Adam looked stunned. "Me?" he said faintly. "Down to the pitch?"

"Well, go on," Charlie said, giving him a friendly shove. "Don't make us carry you."

Adam walked dazedly to the door of the box, and then he seemed to come to life. He turned back, flashed a huge grin at all of them, then whirled and sprinted down and out of the stands and to the gate, where burly security guards ushered him onto the pitch. The referee led him to the polished wooden trunk and handed him a key.

Adam turned, squinted up at the top box, and waved his key in the air. Harry, the Weasleys and their friends all cheered. And then Adam bent down, unlocked the trunk, and leapt back to avoid being smashed by the Bludgers, both of which zoomed out at top speed.

"Oh—" Mrs. Weasley gasped. "My goodness, that was almost his nose."

The Quaffle floated up next and was grabbed in midair by the referee. The Snitch was last to flutter out. It hovered for a second in front of Adam, winked flirtatiously, and then skittered off into the sky as Adam watched it, his face intent and his eyes very narrow. Harry found himself wondering what position Adam would get to play at school next year, or if he'd want to play at all.

"We should really go and see him play," he said to Ron. "If he plays at Hogwarts."

"Okay," said Ron absently, his eyes scanning the players as they rose into the sky and gathered around the center of the pitch, where the referee was taking his place with the Quaffle.

"You'd have to cheer for Slytherin," Hermione pointed out.

Harry and Ron looked dubiously at each other, and then they both snorted with laughter.

"McGonagall would have kittens, wouldn't she?" Ron said.

"That'd make it worth it," said Fred. "So I'll go with you."

"And me," said George. "You know, we're right down the street from Hogwarts, we really ought to pay weekly visits to McGonagall next year."

"Oh, definitely," Angelina agreed. "And we can, you know, show the new third years round Hogsmeade for her."

"Adam'll be in third year!" said Fred, his eyes lighting up. "I hadn't thought of that—but we'll show him *everything*, won't we, George?"

"He'll have advantages most young boys can only dream of," said George, rubbing his hands together. "Harry—do you still have that map?"

"Yeah, of course," said Harry. "I'll bequeath it to him before September first."

Sirius and Remus looked extremely pleased.

Adam came bursting back into the box, panting as if he'd run up all the stairs. "That was *brilliant*," he crowed. "I'm *famous*—when I get back to school I'll tell everyone about doing that—and doing the stuff at Azkaban—and living with the Minister of Magic—"

"Do be quiet, dear," said Mrs. Weasley absently, patting his head. She handed him a small sack of Knuts and Sickles. "Run along and get me a nice big iced pumpkin juice, would you? Oh, and here—" She handed Adam a few more coins. "Get drinks for your friends as well. That's a good boy."

Adam scowled and turned to Mr. Weasley for support.

But Mr. Weasley only shrugged. "As I understand it, Adam, you're still grounded. You're quite lucky to be here at all today, you know. You'd better do as she says."

Adam gave a long-suffering sigh and stomped out, muttering something about not being appreciated. The other boys, who had been looking quite jealous, looked mollified by the prospect of being brought pumpkin juice by their famous friend. They happily returned their attention to the pitch.

"Mum'll keep his feet on the ground," Ginny whispered to Harry. "It's a good thing, too. He might have turned out like Malfoy or something, honestly."

Harry agreed. He glanced over his shoulder at Mrs. Weasley, who was having a quiet word with her husband, and he felt a surge of admiration. She really had a knack for turning strange little boys into normal human beings. He knew it first hand.

"*THE QUAFFLE IS UP!*"

Ron gave a victorious shout and Harry turned back to the match just in time to see Ginny hurl her confetti orange into the sky. They both threw back their heads and watched the start of the final through a haze of tiny orange and black butterflies, and Ginny slipped her hand around Harry's head and brought his ear over to her mouth, in the chaos.

"You'll be out there next year," she whispered, and her breath shot straight into his head, making him shut his eyes and grip the railing for balance. "Won't you."

Harry knew Mr. Weasley was in the row behind them. He knew it was a reckless move. But he couldn't stop himself—he had to return the favor—he reached over to cradle Ginny's head in his hand, and he pulled her ear over to him.

"If that's where you want me," he said hoarsely.

Ginny shivered, and then shouted for joy and threw up her hands. Harry let her go and did the same. Cole Kerry had just scored the first goal of the match.

* * * * *

"Molly! Did you see that!"

"It would have been hard to miss it, dear. It's all happening right in front of my face." Molly gave her husband's knee a fond pat. She had never been much for Quidditch, except when Arthur had played Keeper in school. Then, every goal scored against Gryffindor had seemed a terrible crime, and every incredible save had been a reason to lose her voice entirely. She had used to sit in the stands and look forward to the rest of the evening, knowing that when the game was done, and he had showered and either celebrated or licked his wounds, they'd sneak off together into some abandoned room or other, where she could tell him how wonderful he was, whether he had won or lost.

"What a save!"

Molly leaned against his shoulder. He was still wonderful. Whether he won or lost. But she was very, very glad that he had won; there was no one so qualified to be the Minister of Magic. No one she trusted as much to oversee the affairs of their world—she tried to imagine that he was not her husband, tried to imagine how she would have felt about his election if she had no personal bias, and she was almost sure that she would have been his supporter even if he were a stranger. After all, under his supervision, the Ministry had been rebuilt and the Dementors had been destroyed. Under his supervision, their world had mended itself in many ways. Molly knew there was still enormous work to be done, but with Arthur at the helm, it would all come to rights. She had no doubt of that. And he had begun to gather a council of worthy witches and wizards around him, who would—she hoped—make it possible for him to be home a little more often.

"I thought you said that Rose Brown was coming to the match, dear?" Arthur had chosen Rose as the Chancellor of the Ministry's Exchequer—a post with which she seemed extremely pleased. "With her husband?"

Arthur didn't seem to hear her. He clapped a hand to his chest and let out a breath. "That was a close one!" he said. "Wood's an excellent Keeper—and I suppose it's too late to pretend I'm unbiased, what with all this confetti."

Harry had just launched another exploding orange into the air, and Molly watched him affectionately. She very much liked to see his arm slip around Ginny in that protective way, and she entirely understood the starry-eyed gaze her daughter turned on him when she thought no one was looking. They were wonderful together. Even Arthur thought so. And he had always said that he wouldn't give Ginny up to anything less than the best young man in Britain—it would have been hard to find a better.

"Yeah, Mick and Rose are coming, Mum," Charlie said from behind her, and Molly craned her neck to look at him. "I'm dead surprised he wasn't here early, actually—he's almost as big a fan as I am."

"It's probably the security at the gates," said Cho. "If they'd been with us they could have cut straight to the front of the queue, because of your dad and all. But if they've had to wait with everyone else—"

"Then they've had to wait an hour. You're right." Charlie tapped Cho's Butterbeer bottle with his own. "Do you need another?"

"Mine's bottomless, isn't yours?"

Charlie's eyebrows shot up. "Clever one, aren't you?" he said, and nudged her. "No, mine's regular, but I'll go and exchange it—want anything?"

Cho smiled a bit and shook her head. She was a very pretty girl, Molly thought.

"Mum?"

"No, thank you, Charlie," said Molly, giving Adam's shoulder a pat. "I've got the help I need in that department." She watched Charlie squeeze politely past Cho and disappear into the throng of orange-clad fans, and she marveled at the difference a steady girlfriend had made in him. He had never been so... well... *tame*.

"Ron, you're going to *fall*!"

Molly turned back to see Hermione sitting back in her seat, bracing her feet against the railing and holding Ron by the back belt loops of his trousers so that he wouldn't pitch over the side of the stands and plummet onto the other fans.

"Can you sit down for *five seconds*?" she asked, clearly exasperated. Molly wanted to tell her that it was no use, but it was almost amusing to watch Hermione trying so hard to achieve the

impossible. And she would learn soon enough—if she hadn't learned already—that there was no sense in trying to change a Weasley. They were all mad.

Ron reached around behind himself, grabbed both of Hermione's wrists, and pulled her to her feet behind him. She nearly fell against his back—she gave a little squeal of protest and pulled away to stand beside him, shooting a quick, blushing glance behind her to see who was watching. She caught Molly's eyes for a flickering, embarrassed second, and glanced immediately away.

Molly would have told her that she didn't mind at all. But Hermione never would have believed it.

"Ron, honestly," Hermione muttered.

"Now, look at their Keeper," Ron said, in a professorial sort of voice. "He plays for England—but Wood'll replace him if the Cannons win tonight, I guarantee it. Atlas has been England's Keeper for a few years, and he's good—but Wood's better."

"Atlas like the myth?" Hermione asked, making Ron look quizzically at her.

Harry laughed. "Do you know what his first name is, Hermione?"

She shook her head.

"Vernon," said Ron and Harry together, making both Hermione and Ginny scowl and declare their undying dislike for the man, though they had never met him. Molly knew that Harry's uncle was called Vernon, and she found herself inclined to despise the Falcons Keeper as well, based solely on his name. She wondered if Harry would ever see that horrible family of his again, for any reason. She hoped not. They weren't really his family. Not in his heart—she knew it. On impulse, she reached out and smoothed the back of his unruly black hair, trying to pat it into shape. It was very much the same impulse that kept her fiddling with Bill's ponytail, and it was... strange, perhaps, to be so truly attached to a child who wasn't her flesh and blood. But it wasn't really strange. Harry had been with them for so long that he felt quite like her own, and she thought that he probably felt the same way.

The shy, happy smile he turned on her left no room for doubt.

"It won't lie flat," he told her, quickly pushing up his glasses. "I've been trying for years."

Molly ruffled his fringe, caught a glimpse of his scar, and sighed for him as he turned away. He had been through too much. He was due a long rest. She was very glad that he seemed to be about to take it.

"Rose! What's wrong?"

Molly turned. Arthur sounded concerned; he was looking at Rose Brown, who had just appeared at the door of the top box, looking absolutely exhausted.

Arthur was on his feet. "Is it at the Ministry? What have I missed? Do I need to—"

"No, Arthur, it's not at the Ministry." Rose rubbed her head. "If it were, I could do something about it. Is there a seat...?"

Cho motioned to the two empty seats on her other side, and Rose sank into one of them.

"Rose?" Molly frowned worriedly up at her. "Is there something you need?"

Rose shook her head and waved a listless hand in the air. "You'll see," she said vaguely. "Just wait."

Molly didn't have to wait long. A few moments later there was a sort of cannibal war cry from outside the door, and two strange, savage looking beasts appeared in the top box. They were shirtless, they smelt of very strong alcohol, and their faces and chests were painted in garish orange, with huge black letters written in paint across their fronts. One bare orange chest bore an enormous C, and the other an A.

It was a long, shocked moment before Molly realized in horror that one of the beasts was Charlie.

"Charles Beauregard Weasley!" she shrieked. "Put your *clothes* on, you are in *public*, and your *father*—"

But it was too late. Flashbulbs were popping everywhere. Arthur was tucking his wand into his robes, looking torn between anger and amusement, and amusement was obviously getting the better of him. Molly gave him a hard look.

"Tell your son to *behave*."

"Behave yourself, Charlie," Arthur said automatically, taking Molly's hand. "The damage is done," he whispered, leaning towards her. "It's too late now. Might as well let them have their fun."

"You'll never be re-elected if they carry on like this!"

"Well, it was never my plan to be elected in the first place and these... are..." He looked around and shook his head. "My... children."

He looked as though he wasn't quite sure where they had come from, and Molly had to laugh. He was right. Elections were all well and good, and it was wonderful that he was Minister for now. But

no matter what happened next, they would manage just as they always had. And if their children wanted to be Quidditch fanatics, well then, as long as they weren't hurting anyone, it was all right.

"Besides," Arthur said after a moment, a faint smile playing on his lips. "Fleur taught me the most interesting charm before she and Bill left for France—a Diversion Enchantment, she called it. Do you know why the flashbulbs stopped popping a moment ago?"

Molly shook her head.

"Because this box looks empty to everyone outside it." Arthur patted his wand. "I don't know how the Muggle politicians manage it, I really don't."

"I'm the C!" Mick shouted, beating his chest and making Rose give a disgusted sigh.

"So much for my career," she muttered. "Can't take him anywhere."

Arthur motioned Rose over, and quietly told her what he had just told Molly. She looked enormously relieved and sat down again beside Cho, who was watching the spectacle and laughing.

"I'm the A!" Charlie bellowed. "We need an N!"

Ron shoved his Bottomless Butterbeer Extra into Harry's hands and ripped off his shirt. Hermione dropped into her seat and shut her eyes. She obviously knew that there was no point in trying to fight it.

"PAINT ME!" Ron shouted, and Charlie threw him a pot of glowing orange body paint, which Ron proceeded to smear all over himself. He grabbed the black paint next, and swiped a giant N across his front. "WE NEED ANOTHER N!" he cried.

Fred was the next to lose his shirt, and then George, who became the O. Angelina painted a great black N right over the front of her Magpies T-shirt, and they all made a line at the front of the box. Sirius tried to join them, but Remus grabbed the back of his robes and told him, in no uncertain terms, that it was out of the question. Hermione climbed into the row behind Ron and took Fred's old seat, and Ginny took George's.

Harry stayed where he was, looking torn.

"We need an S, Harry!" Charlie shouted, and pushed the orange paint at Harry, who didn't take it. Instead he took a long, long swig of his Butterbeer Extra, as though trying to work himself into the fury that the rest of them were in.

"Come on, mate," Ron pleaded. "Be the S, you *have to*."

But Harry wasn't having any of it. He simply continued to drink. He was such a modest boy, Molly thought, watching him. He really didn't seem to fit in with the rest of them that way. It would probably take a lot more than Butterbeer to get Harry to go half-naked in a public place, and Molly was very glad of it.

"Drink up," Charlie said, shoving a sinister-looking, dark green bottle at Harry. "Go on, have a swig—that's it, Harry! All right!"

Looking half-determined and half-sick, Harry put the bottle to his lips and took a swallow. He winced and ducked his head, then let out a sort of groan.

"I hate this stuff," he said, holding it out to Ron, who took a swallow without so much as making a face, pushed it immediately back into Harry's hands, and leapt into the air with a shout as two of the Cannons Chasers flew towards each other at top speed and nearly crushed one of the Falcons Chasers between them.

Molly felt a soft tap on her shoulder, and she turned. Penelope had reached out with her wand from two rows back. She had Leo cradled to her shoulder, and he was beginning to cry. The two of them had been so quiet that Molly had nearly forgotten that they were there.

"I'm going to go," Penelope said, indicating Leo. "He needs a nap, and I think the noise is getting to him." Penelope looked as though the noise was getting to her, too, and she seemed quite pleased that she had Leo to get her out of the rest of the match.

The match had been going for nearly an hour and a half, and Molly thought she might prefer to go home herself. She had a feeling that she would be shouted at by all the men in her family if she tried to abandon the finals, and she wished she had a fussy baby for an excuse.

"Would you like to put him down for his nap at the Burrow, dear?" Molly asked. "And have a cuppa? It's been so long since we had a nice chat."

"But you're not really going," Arthur pleaded at once. "It's only just started, Molly—"

"Yes, but Arthur, Penny will be leaving for Cortona as soon as she has permission to go, and I'd like to spend some time with her." She kissed his cheek and whispered in his ear: "And you know I only ever cared for Quidditch when *you* played."

Arthur's ears went red. "Oh, go on then," he said gruffly, smiling a bit. "Have your tea. I'll see you at home."

Molly kissed him again and stood up. "You'll bring the boys home for dinner?"

"Of course." He patted her leg and stood to let her past, and she squeezed by him, towards the exit. As she followed Penelope to the door, she saw the Quaffle hurtle past Oliver Wood and go straight through the center hoop.

"FALCONS SCORE!"

The howl of misery that erupted from the front row was almost comical. The foul-mouthed insults that followed it, however, were not. Molly couldn't tell who was shouting what, and she couldn't reach all of them to give them the raps on their heads that they deserved. She clenched her fists, propped them on her hips, narrowed her eyes into slits and sucked in a breath.

"BOYS!"

Charlie, Mick, Fred, George, Ron, Angelina and Harry all turned at once. They all looked terrified.

"How *can* you swear like that?" Molly hissed, glaring at them each in turn, with all the force she had. It was quite a bit. "Isn't it bad enough you're using your *father's* box to do your stripping and drinking in? Didn't you notice the *press*? Can't you at least watch your *language*?" She knew very well that no one could see the spectacle her children were making, and it was very likely that no one could hear them either, but that wasn't the point. They didn't *know* that they couldn't be seen or heard. "None of you has *any* respect," she finished icily. "What have you to say for yourselves? How are you going to make it up to your father?"

Hermione and Rose both looked very smug. Ginny and Cho looked entertained, and so did all the younger boys.

"Sorry, Mr. Weasley," Harry said at once, clearly mortified to have been included in the scolding. Molly usually excused him, but she was fairly sure that some of the language had come from him as well, and there was no reason for him to get out of trouble anymore. He wasn't a guest.

"Sorry, Dad." Charlie ducked his head.

"Sorry, Mr. Weasley... Sorry, Rosie."

"I'm really sorry, Arthur."

"Want us to put our shirts back on, Dad?"

"Are we making you look bad? We can stop."

"Dad... I... forgot..." Ron blinked up at his father from behind a mask of messy orange and black stripes, looking honestly ashamed. "Do we... do we need to leave?"

It was the ultimate sacrifice, and it seemed they all knew it. Everyone glanced at Ron in surprise—even Arthur.

"Oh, well." Arthur laughed lightly. "I don't know that we need to take it that far, boys. Now, say goodbye to Penny and your mother—they're going home."

Everyone said goodbye, and Molly left, feeling much better. They really were wonderful children. Just thoughtless, sometimes. She had only had one son who would have tried to talk the others down from their nonsense. Well—perhaps two. But even Bill had never been as conscientious as Percy. Molly paused in mid step, closed her eyes for just an instant, and sent her love to him, wherever he was.

"You're amazing," Penny said, as they wound their way down the stadium stairs and towards the exit. "I hope Leo will listen to me like that, when he's older."

"Oh, he will, dear," Molly said. "If he's anything like his father, you won't even have to shout."

Penny bent suddenly and kissed Leo's face. Molly passed a gentle hand over Penny's hair, and her heart was strangely light as they passed through stadium security and stepped out into the cool summer twilight. Not everything was as it should have been—but it was close. And it was good.

* * * * *

The moment Molly Weasley left the top box, Arthur cleared his throat and addressed his guilty children.

"Don't worry about it. Honestly." He pointed into empty space. "I put up a charm, and no one can see you. Go to it."

Everyone looked confused for a moment, and then they gave one loud, grateful, exonerated whoop and turned back to drink and shout and beat their chests and watch the match. Only Ron kept facing his father, his eyes shining.

"You're *brilliant*, Dad," he rasped. He swiped under his eyes and smeared his face paint. "*Brilliant*. I thought we'd really ruined it for you—I thought we were going to have to—to *leave*—"

"Yes, well. Watch the match," Arthur said, and Ron sniffed, nodded and turned away while Hermione and Ginny looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

Remus had to work not to laugh. He and Sirius were sitting at the edge of the box, and had so far managed to keep out of the line of fire—though if Sirius had been allowed to do what he wanted,

he would have leapt out of the box several minutes ago with no shirt on and a huge S painted on his chest.

"Harry'd better do it," Sirius was muttering. "There's no point in him being shy like that—these are his *friends*—" He put his fingers on his wand as if he was tempted to pull it and make Harry's shirt disappear.

"Don't," Remus said. "Think of James."

Sirius snorted. "James would have got him drunk and painted him himself. Why do you think he made *me* godfather?"

"Then think of Lily. Imagine she's standing here, watching you ruin her only son."

Sirius sighed, then pressed his mouth shut and looked very pensive. "Do you ever wonder how many children they would have had if..."

Remus had wondered it. He'd wondered everything; there had been plenty of time. "They were... so in love," he said wistfully, remembering what they had been like together. "I imagine that, unless they had been very careful, they would probably have ended up with a family as big as Arthur's."

Sirius grinned. "James would be gratified to know we gave him that much credit."

Remus wasn't sure he could joke about it. "James would have been an excellent father," he said quietly.

"Remus, may I interrupt?" Arthur's voice was mild. "I have a question."

He moved over into the seat beside Arthur's, shielding his eyes against a sudden blast of bright orange light. Ron had lit a fistful of sparklers and was passing them out. He handed one to Harry, who still had his shirt on, but was taking another swig out of the green bottle and beginning to look rather tipsy.

"GIVE US AN S, HARRY!" Mick roared.

Harry passed the bottle to Angelina and shoved back his fringe with an unsteady hand.

"TWO HOUR MATCH!" Ron shouted to Hermione, who looked nonplussed. "LET'S HOPE FOR FIVE DAYS!"

Hermione nodded kindly, took a sparkler, and waited for Ron to turn around again before she handed the sparkler off to Sirius and went back to nursing her Butterbeer along with Ginny. They leaned together, glancing at Ron and Harry by turns, and whispering and giggling at intervals. Both their faces had grown rather pink, and Remus wondered just how much they'd drunk. He didn't have to wonder what they were talking about.

"Remus," Arthur said, "what are your plans for—oh, that was a *corker* of a save, wasn't it—did you see that?"

Remus hadn't.

"The Falcons are better than I expected," Arthur went on. "I'd hate to see them win—mostly for Ron's sake, you know. But if they keep blocking shots as good as that one, I'd say it's all going to come down to the Snitch. What do you think?"

"It's likely, I suppose," Remus said noncommittally, wondering what it was that Arthur wanted to know about his plans.

"It's always so much more interesting that way, I think," Arthur said, obviously warming up to the subject. Remus began to see where Ron got his enthusiasm. "For example, the Quidditch World Cup I took the children to in 1995—Bulgaria caught the Snitch in that one, but Ireland won it. Fascinating when it goes that way, isn't it?"

"Fascinating."

Arthur slanted a look at him. "I take it you're not exactly wild for Quidditch?" he said, smiling.

Remus laughed. "I used to be, a bit. In school. When my friends all played."

"You didn't play?"

Remus looked out over the pitch. The fact was that he really *couldn't* have played—not even if he'd been as fanatical as James. It simply wouldn't have been fair to go out for the team and then have a full moon recovery get in the way of an important match. Dumbledore probably would have scheduled things around the moon, but Dumbledore had made enough exceptions for him, and Remus hadn't wanted to ask.

"I wasn't really interested," he finally answered.

Arthur nodded. "What does interest you? Aside from teaching, I mean. I know you're a very good teacher—do you plan to return to Hogwarts, in the Autumn?"

Remus had a feeling that Arthur was leading up to something. He wasn't sure whether to be excited or very nervous. He shrugged. "Minerva asked me to come back and teach Care of Magical Creatures," he said slowly.

"And is that what you'll do?"

"No... the young lady who took over for Hagrid—Meg Castellwild—I believe she's taken the post. I *did* enjoy teaching Defense..."

"But?" Arthur asked.

Remus wasn't sure what made him hesitate. Perhaps it was that he knew Hogwarts was his only option, and he wanted other avenues to be available to him. Perhaps it was that he knew that, even after his service in the war, there would be hundreds of parents who simply would not want him supervising their children. That prejudice, he knew, had not even begun to vanish from their world. He wondered if it ever really would.

"The Ministry's far from fully staffed, you know," Arthur said, almost absently. "I'm just in the middle of appointing Heads of departments. You know about Rose, of course."

"Arthur, I don't think you could have made a better choice," Remus said, and he thought Rose might have heard him in the next row back. She lifted her chin and a smile touched her mouth.

Arthur adjusted his hat. "I rely on her absolutely," he said. "Couldn't have got through this year without her there every step of the way. I really did expect her to be elected Minister, you know—and I would have been pleased if she had."

Now Remus was sure Rose was listening. Her hands were clasped very tightly in her lap, and she glowed out at the Quidditch pitch, though she didn't seem to see the match.

"Diggory's going to stay at the head of the Department of Magical Law," Arthur went on. "Moody just agreed to do one more year with the Aurors—just one, he told me. He swore he'd retire five years ago, and he does deserve a rest. But we need him—there's nothing else for it. And he's unwilling to turn over Aurors' training to someone less qualified."

"Does that put Culparrat under his jurisdiction?"

"It does, and he's appointed a deputy head of staff there—Elizabeth Duzen. Says she's his most promising new recruit."

Remus wasn't sure it was fair to ask the question that weighed on his mind—but he had to. "I know there were some... tentative plans to use..." He didn't know why it still bothered him to say it. "Werewolves. As prison guards. Is that still something that's being considered?"

Arthur shook his head. "It's unnecessary. The elves have arranged an extensive system by which they take care of all the prisoners' needs without having to lift any of the enchanted wards—they're quite powerful, elves. The Apparition borders don't faze them at all. And that makes it a very easy place to guard—unless the Imprisonment Enchantment should come crashing down, which is highly unlikely. There will be Aurors on the shore and at the entrance. That's all that's needed."

Remus felt a stab of disappointment. It wasn't that he had wanted to be a prison guard, exactly. But it would have been another opportunity. It would have made him feel that he had options. And he knew that many people in his predicament would have felt the same way.

"The Department of Mysteries—well," Arthur chuckled. "Can't tell you who's heading that up." He rubbed his hands together. "You know, that's the *best* part of this job. I always wanted to know what went on there. And I still don't, really, but at least I know..." He waved a hand and shook his head. "Never mind. The Department of Magical Justice—"

"I suppose Sirius will stay as Head of that?"

"Yes."

Remus tried not to be jealous. He really was pleased for Sirius. It was the job he deserved. "And Ron will be his deputy?"

Arthur shushed him immediately. "It's not official yet," he whispered. "Ron has no idea that he's going to have a title." He grinned. "I remember when I was officially promoted from my clerkship. It was thrilling."

Remus could only imagine.

"I only wish we had such capable wizards in every department. The Privy Council has elected a new Secretary, but the Department of Magical Transportation is sadly unsupervised, the Department of Magical Games and Sports—ever since Ludo Bagman ran off..."

Remus frowned out at the pitch. "Who's organizing the league, then? And keeping all this going?"

"Everyone that remains in that department, and they're working themselves to death. I suppose I'll have to promote one of them and let them hire on a few others, but none of them are quite what the Ministry..." Arthur sighed. "Well. You can't have everything. The Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures isn't in good shape, either."

"Isn't it?" Hermione had whirled in her seat to stare up at them, round-eyed, pink patches shining on her cheeks. "Do you need help, Mr. Weasley?"

"Hermione," said Arthur, laughing, "I would have offered you a job last year if you'd wanted it. Is that a department that interests you?"

Hermione bit her lips together for a moment. "Well, not the way it was run *before*," she said. "But I have a lot of ideas—is there a staff at all?"

"Almost none." Arthur ran a hand through his thinning hair. "Most of them, I'm sorry to say, are either dead or in Culparrat. It was... a very corrupt department."

"I *know*," Hermione said, looking furious. But she shook her head and focused herself. "I'd like to read through their files and things, if you'd let me. I still work for the Ministry, don't I? I'll just stay on as a Thinker until you decide where you need me—but can I read everything they left behind, can't I?"

"Everything?" Arthur smiled at her. "There are thousands of files—"

"That'll take her about a day," Ron called out carelessly. Remus wasn't sure how he could keep an ear on the match and Hermione all at once, but it seemed his brain was split in two equal parts. "Maybe a day and a half if she's feeling lazy."

Hermione grinned.

"We'll speak more about it on Monday, Hermione, if that's all right," Arthur said. "But I'd very much like to have your help."

Looking very pleased and proud, Hermione turned back to Ginny.

"Azkaban was such a drain on our time and resources," Arthur said, his eyes following the Bludgers as they were beaten at one player and then another. "It's... a relief to be concentrating on everything else." He smiled over at Remus. "Thank you for what you've done for Ginny," he said, keeping his voice low. Ginny was right in front of them.

"She did most of it herself," Remus began.

"No." Arthur shook his head. "None of us ever identified her abilities. You did that. And you taught her well enough that she earned *nine* N.E.W.T.s—when she never put a thought into test scores before. She always seemed to think that there was no point in trying for those kinds of achievements. Do you know how many O.W.L.s she..." Arthur laughed. "Well, I suppose it wasn't as bad as Fred and George, but it wasn't fantastic. You've got a gift with education—you seem to understand what they *need*. And you know the ins and outs of the administration process at Hogwarts—Britain's premiere institution for magical education. And you've kept teaching when most other teachers didn't have an opportunity to do it. You've taught every subject, and some that aren't even on the mandatory list. It's quite incredible, what you've done. And that's just in terms of school, isn't it? I haven't even gone into what I know of your leadership abilities, and your integrity, and your loyalty."

Remus wasn't sure what to do with all the compliments. "I... was a student once," he said haltingly. "I remember what I needed. That's really... all there is to it."

Arthur didn't answer. He followed the Quaffle with his eyes, sucked in a breath, and shook his head when it shot past Oliver again, to the despair of Ron, who dropped into his seat and moaned unhappily.

"The Department of Magical Education is in ruins, Remus," Arthur said, without looking at him. "Ruins. The Hogwarts governors who are still in place are easily influenced by money and power. You know that."

Remus wasn't sure where Arthur's speech was headed, but he felt his heart speeding up. He didn't dare to hope.

"I need a Head of department that I can trust to revise and enforce legitimate standards for magical education. Someone who won't be cowed by that board, or by the other private committees that have always been in place. I need someone who knows what's really necessary for children, and who really has the children in mind. Not himself. Or his paycheck."

Remus could hardly breathe.

"I know it's a lot to ask." Arthur blew out a breath. "But I hope you'll take the post, Remus. I've talked it over with Rose and the Privy Council, and we've had a look at other candidates, and though there are a few others who are interested in the position, none of them are as worthy of it as you."

The Snitch fluttered out. All around Remus, the stands burst into cheers so piercing that he should have been in pain—he should have covered his ears. But he couldn't even move.

"TAKE YOUR TIME DECIDING," Arthur shouted over the chaos. "I DON'T EXPECT YOU TO HAVE AN ANSWER NOW—OH, WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT—"

The Falcons Seeker had knocked Maureen Knight from her broom—she dangled by one hand, fifty feet above the pitch, while the fans screamed in terror. It was a minute before she was able to haul herself back onto her broom, and by the time she had, the Snitch had disappeared again. The fans on both sides gave a sigh of disappointment.

Arthur checked his watch. "Half six," he mused. "Molly'll have dinner ready by seven—ah well. Come on, boys. Time to go."

"But it's not over!" Adam protested. "Ron will bring us back—or Charlie!" The other boys murmured their agreement.

"I'll bring you back," said Arthur. "You can listen to the rest on the wireless."

"But—"

"But nothing. This isn't the last Quidditch match of the year, is it? There's still the World Cup Finals, and if you're good about this, I just might be able to manage a few tickets to *that*." Arthur clapped Remus on the shoulder as he stood. "Think about it," he said. "Come along, boys."

He led Adam and the rest of them out of the box, leaving Remus to sit, stunned, contemplating the opportunity that had just been given him.

Sirius wasted no time in coming to sit beside him. "Well?" he demanded. "What was that all about?"

Remus wasn't sure he could answer without his emotions getting the better of him. He swallowed hard and blinked even harder.

"Remus? Moony, are you all right?"

"You... you know the Department of Magical Education?" Remus asked faintly.

Sirius nodded, frowning.

"Where is its main office? In comparison with yours?"

Sirius gave him a wary look. "It's on the same corridor—why?"

Remus started to laugh. He ran a hand through his hair and watched the sky, where Oliver Wood was trying to fend off a Quaffle and a Bludger at the same time. He managed the Bludger and missed the Quaffle, and Remus tried to feel sorry about it. But he couldn't. He had just been handed a life. A real one, which had nothing to do with the lunar cycle.

"Well then," he said, still laughing as he met Sirius's bemused eyes. "It looks like we'll be seeing a lot more of each other."

* * * * *

It was eight o'clock. Hermione's neck was in pain. She rubbed it with both hands and tried to keep her eyes on the sky, but she had never had to watch Quidditch for four hours straight, and it was like torture. She just didn't care about it when it wasn't Harry and Ron. She never had. And it was going to be months before Ron recovered if the Cannons lost, which it looked like they were going to do. The score was seven hundred to five hundred, and the Falcons didn't look at all tired, while Oliver Wood was beginning to look fatigued.

Sirius and Remus had left the match at seven, and Rose Brown had gone home half-an-hour ago, when Cho had moved down to stand beside Charlie. Hermione wished that she could leave, but she knew what would happen if she tried it.

"Won't the Snitch come out again?" she complained softly. "Come on..."

"We don't *want* the bloody Snitch yet," Harry said, turning around so quickly that he nearly threw himself off balance. His eyes were glazed. "You're clever, you can prob'ly subtract, you know the Falcons're two hundred points ahead, so even if the Cannons *caught* the Snitch it wouldn't help them now!" He wagged a finger at her. "Try to understand," he commanded.

Ginny grabbed his outstretched hand and Harry's focus shifted.

"Hi," he said happily.

Ginny laughed. "Hi," she returned. "Want to come up here and sit by me?"

"NO!" Ron shouted. "HE STILL NEEDS TO BE THE S!"

Harry's eyes widened as though this was something he had entirely meant to do, and then had entirely forgotten. "The S!" he exclaimed. "That's right, that's right—give me th'paint! Who has the paint?"

Mick tossed it to him. Even intoxicated, Harry managed to catch it. He held it out to Ginny.

"Hold this for a minute?" he implored, and when she took it from him, Harry reached for the hem of his T-shirt and pulled it right over his head.

Hermione was shocked. She had never seen Harry so... out of his wits.

"YEAH!" Harry shouted, and flung his T-shirt out of the box and over the crowd. Below them, one of the Cannons fans caught it and looked up, confused, trying to work out where it had come from. "You can't see us!" Harry taunted, laughing. "This is great—where's that paint?" He turned around again and frowned at Hermione. "Where's Ginny?"

Hermione jabbed a thumb behind her, where Ginny had disappeared into the upper, darker corner of the half-empty box, paint in hand. Harry clambered unsteadily over the rows of seats in

order to get to her, and Hermione didn't turn to watch them. Instead she pulled out her Omnioculars and focused on the match—but when a foul was called a moment later she grew bored and focused beyond the pitch, to the other side of the stands, where the Falcons supporters were sitting. She swept the Omnioculars across the crowd, wondering if she would recognize anyone.

A second later, she wished she hadn't looked. Her heart gave an uncomfortable, ugly wrench.

Malfoy was sitting in the center of a throng of important-looking people, his clothes and hair impeccable, his smirk implacable, his own Omnioculars—which looked much more advanced—held to his eyes as he scanned the pitch.

Hermione drew breath—her first impulse was to point Malfoy out to Ron and Harry—she lowered the Omnioculars and urgently tapped Ron's shoulder.

Ron turned around, reached up, grabbed her by the waist and looked up at her with his very silly orange and black striped face. "You're not leaving, are you?" he asked worriedly. "You can't leave—this is the best night of my—well, no—but it's close—you have to see it through to the end with me, you *can't leave*."

Hermione opened her mouth to tell him that Malfoy was across the way, but the words wouldn't come. Instead she put her hands in Ron's hair, bent down and gave a very soft kiss on the mouth, not minding too much that she could feel sticky paint coming off on her nose and chin.

"I'm not going anywhere," she murmured. "Unless it really does last five days."

Ron squeezed her waist and beamed up at her. "They don't have much of a lead, really," he said. "I've seen teams come back from far, far worse—they're going to *win*, Hermione. I *feel* it."

Hermione was very glad that she hadn't said anything about Malfoy, and that they were all invisible to Malfoy and all his friends. This night was important to Ron. He deserved to enjoy it without any interference.

"I'm sure they'll win," she said quietly, rubbing his head with her fingers and enjoying the feel of his thick hair in her hands. She hoped it wouldn't all fall out too soon. Ron closed his eyes and reached up his chin for another kiss, which Hermione was more than happy to give him. After all, the box *was* dark, and there was hardly anyone left in it, except for other absolute maniacs, who were all staring out at the pitch and paying no attention to—

"Aha!" Harry crowed, stumbling down over the seats and back towards the front row. He paused beside Hermione, pointed at her and Ron, and burst out laughing as though their kiss was the funniest thing that he had ever seen.

Hermione thought it strange that he should be making fun of *them*. Harry's torso was a mess of orange and black paint, which had been smeared all over him in no particular pattern—there was paint in his hair and on his face and all down the front of his trousers. And as Ginny took her seat beside Hermione again, it was hard not to notice that her hands were bright orange, and that there were tell-tale black streaks across her shirt and in her hair.

"Something funny, Potter?" Ron demanded, and then he scowled. "That's not an S."

Harry didn't seem able to stop laughing. "And that's not a Time-Turner," he managed, grabbing Hermione's left hand and peering at it. "It's too small..." His voice trailed off and he gaped at what he was seeing.

In a panic, Hermione tried to snatch her hand away, but Harry gripped hard, holding up her hand so that he could examine her engagement ring very closely.

"Oh," Hermione fretted. "Let go, Harry, I don't want anyone to see it, I forgot to charm it, I didn't realize we'd be here for so long—"

"Is this an *engagement ring*?" Harry asked, looking dumbfounded. "Is this supposed to mean you're getting married? To each other?"

Everyone who remained in the top box whirled around, their interest in the match apparently forgotten. They all stared at Hermione's hand. Ginny clapped her hands to her mouth.

"Ron!" George said, looking horrified. "Not you too!"

"Welcome to the rest of your miserable life, Ron," Fred said, grabbing Angelina's hand before she could smack him, and kissing the back of it.

"How..." Harry still held onto Hermione's hand. His eyes were full of hurt. "How could you not tell me?" he asked. "How come you didn't want me to see it?"

Hermione felt a stab of horrible guilt. "Oh, Harry, it wasn't that we didn't want to tell you—"

"I wanted to tell, you," Ron declared. "I said we ought to tell you no matter what, but Hermione said—"

"I wanted to wait until my parents could appreciate it, and tell them first," Hermione wailed, feeling worse every second, as Harry continued to gaze at her with lost and bewildered eyes. "Harry, please don't look like that! I've been dying to tell you—we both have."

Harry blinked. He let go of her hand and stared down at Ron. "You're getting *married*?" he asked. "Really? Are you serious?"

Ron licked his lips. He glanced at Hermione. And then he faced Harry and nodded. "You... you'll be our best man, won't you?" he asked, his voice a bit hoarse. Hermione knew it wasn't from all the screaming. "Won't you?" he repeated, when Harry didn't answer.

Harry seemed to be trying to focus. He shook his head, rubbed his temples, and finally snapped, "Do one of those Sobering Charms on me."

Ron did it so quickly that Harry had to grip Hermione's shoulder for support as his eyes became clear and his footing became sure. He left his hand on her shoulder and met her eyes with his very fierce green ones.

"Do *you* want me to be best man too?" he asked, almost inaudibly.

Hermione suddenly couldn't find her voice. "Well who else?" she managed, after a minute. "Who else but you?"

Harry's eyes glazed again, with something shocking and wet that Hermione had never seen in them before. He stared at her for another second, then practically leapt over the seats into the front row and stood facing Ron as the rest of them looked on.

"Of course I'll be your best man," Harry said scratchily. "I-I just can't believe--"

Before Hermione knew it, and much to her surprise, Ron and Harry were hugging like brothers. When they came apart, there was a funny noise like something unsticking, and not only did Harry not bear an S on his chest, but Ron's letter looked nothing like an N.

"Congratulations," Ginny whispered, kissing Hermione's cheek. "We'll be *sisters*—I always knew it, but it's so good to *know* it—"

Ginny hugged Hermione tightly and Hermione hugged her back. It wasn't the way she had envisioned the announcement of her engagement. It wasn't the dream she had held in her mind. But as everyone grabbed her and hugged her and told her how glad they were to have her in the family, Hermione knew there was no better way to get engaged. And it didn't matter that she was covered with paint by the end of the enthusiasm, because when everyone had taken their turn, Ron heaved her into his orange and black arms, lifted her over the seats, and gave her a kiss that made everyone cheer.

And then the whole stadium cheered all around them. Ron pulled his mouth away from hers, grabbed her hands and thrust them into the air.

"That's another goal for Chudley," he told her, turning her around in front of him, so that she faced the pitch. "I'm telling you, we're going to *win*."

Hermione leaned back against him and let him wave her arms about. The Cannons didn't matter—but if they were important to Ron...

"GO, CHUDLEY!" she shouted with all the voice she had left. And when she was seized around the middle and given a series of warm kisses on the side of her neck, she knew that she had got it right.

* * * * *

It was midnight. Harry didn't know if he could concentrate on the match much longer. But the score was 1,220 points to Falmouth, and 1,080 to the Cannons, and he knew he had to stay awake. Everyone had left for the night except for him, Ron, Hermione and Ginny, and everyone had promised to come back in the morning if the match was still on.

"One hundred and forty points down!" Ron said, gripping the railing tightly. "If they catch the Snitch now—if they catch the Snitch *right now*—come on, Knight, come on, keep an eye on it..."

Harry did want the Cannons to win. But he couldn't stand up anymore. He sat down beside Ginny, who had climbed into the front row again with the rest of them. She curled up against him, lay her head on his shoulder and sighed.

"Almost over..." she mumbled.

Harry hoped she was right. He felt a bit cold, and wished he hadn't been so stupid as to throw away his shirt. He wondered how he was going to walk out of the stadium without anyone seeing him shirtless. He'd have to buy a Cannons sweatshirt on the way out.

"When it's over," Ron said, still clinging to the railing, "we're all going to the Snout's Fair for a drink—Goldie made me promise."

Harry wasn't sure he really needed another drink. He was very glad they'd done the Sobering Charm on him, though being sober made it hard to forget that Ron and Hermione were engaged. To be married. It wasn't that it was surprising... but it was very, very strange. It seemed so adult.

Hermione sat down on his other side, saying something about her plans for the year. Harry

thought she was asking him a question, but he couldn't quite hear her.

"What?" he asked her, staring up into the floodlit stadium sky and trying to predict the Chasers' formations as they rocketed around. He knew how tired they had to be, but he also knew that if *he* had been out there, then he would have been playing like them, just as hard as he needed to, for as long as it took.

"I said, didn't Dumbledore leave Fawkes to you?" Hermione repeated.

Harry registered the words with some surprise. He hadn't thought about that in a long time, and he tore his eyes away from the Chasers to look at Hermione.

"Yeah," he said. "Fawkes is... mine." It was a strange thing to say. It didn't feel quite right.

"Do you think you'll ever collect him?" Hermione asked. "Where would you put him, if you did?"

Harry wasn't sure. And he couldn't imagine collecting Fawkes, who seemed to belong in Dumbledore's office. Fawkes was as much a part of Hogwarts as the Sorting Hat. It would have been wrong, somehow, to take him away from his home just because it was legal to do so.

"I think he should stay at school," Harry said. "I'll take care of him when I go back." The words were out of Harry before he had time to ask himself what they meant.

"You're going back to Hogwarts?" Ron said, his eyes still on the sky. "What for?"

"I...don't know." Harry looked out over the shining pitch. "I just have a feeling I'll go back."

"To teach?" Hermione sounded excited. "I've thought about doing that. I'd *love* to do that, someday, when I've done a few other things I still want to try."

"It'd be great, wouldn't it." Ginny's voice was quiet.

Harry looked at her in surprise. "You want to teach?" he said. "I never knew that."

"I don't think I'd teach," she said, following the match with her tired eyes. "But I'd like to be Madam Pomfrey."

Harry couldn't help a smile. The boys at Hogwarts would certainly think of their school nurse much differently than he'd ever thought of his. He slipped his arm around her.

"Oh, you'd be so good at that!" Hermione sounded truly excited now. "Ron, wouldn't you want to go back?"

"Yeah," he said, and snorted. "I'll be Madam Hooch."

"No, that's my job," Harry said. "You'll teach Defense."

Ron glanced over his shoulder. "Harry, I think that's your departm—"

Harry interrupted, shaking his head. "You'll teach them how to break Imperius better than anyone ever could."

Ron looked away. His ears were pink. But he squared his shoulders and nodded. "Yeah, all right," he said, after a minute. "I could teach Defense." He gave a snort of unexpected laughter. "And Professor Granger can take over Trelawney's tower."

"*Right*," said Hermione, rolling her eyes. "Can't you just see me?"

"Throwing orbs at the poor little children? Yeah, I can see you."

"Ron, honestly. No, I want Transfiguration, definitely, if McGonagall ever gets tired of it. Oh—although I wouldn't mind running the library. Actually, I'd probably do *best* if I taught Arithmancy—that was my best subject—and I'd love to be head of Gryffindor House, too, because I think I could set a good ex—"

Ron thunked down beside her, threw an arm around her neck and clapped his hand over her mouth.

"It's settled then," Harry said, and though they were only playing around he had the strangest feeling that they weren't joking at all. "We'll go back in ten years or so. When we're ready."

A hush fell over the four of them in the loud Quidditch stadium.

"*THE SNITCH IS OUT AGAIN!*"

Ron made a noise like a Manticore having a seizure, and grabbed the package of *Weasleys Ultimate Party Crackers* from the seat where George had left them. He passed them out to Harry, Hermione and Ginny.

"Get ready!" he commanded. "It's going to happen. *It's going to happen!*"

They all jumped up, crackers in hand, and waited, watching, as Carmel Coyle and Maureen Knight headed for the Snitch, side by side.

At the same time, as if in slow motion, Harry saw the Falcons Chasers approaching the Cannons goal posts once more. They moved in perfect sync, using a strategy Harry was not familiar with. But Oliver didn't seem to notice their approach. His eyes, like everyone else's in the stadium, were fixed on Knight, watching her as she streaked towards the fluttering silver and gold ball.

"OLIVER!" Harry shouted, as though somehow his voice could carry that far. "LOOK OUT!"

Knight edged just ahead of Coyle and reached out her hand. At the same moment, one of the Falcons Chasers caught the Quaffle, took aim, and slung the red ball towards the far left hoop.

There was no way that Oliver could stop the ball from soaring past him. He noticed it a moment too late—he flung nearly his whole body from the broomstick and performed a reckless Starfish and Stick that made the whole crowd gasp, but it wasn't enough. The Quaffle escaped his outstretched fingers and made for the golden hoop.

“CATCH IT NOW!” Ron bellowed. “NOW, NOW, NOW—”

Knight's fingers closed around the Snitch.

The Quaffle flew through the goal hoops.

There was a moment of silence, in which both sides tried to discern exactly what had happened, and at what time. The referee blew his whistle and made several gestures that were difficult to interpret. Ron sucked in a breath and held it, waiting.

“AND MAUREEN KNIGHT CATCHES THE SNITCH HALF A SECOND BEFORE THE FALCONS SCORE AGAIN! THE CHUDLEY CANNONS HAVE WON THE CUP BY TEN POINTS!”

Ron fell into his chair, his eyes closed, his body slack. Harry was sure he had fainted.

“IT'S THEIR FIRST WIN IN OVER A CENTURY—AND LOOK AT THEIR CAPTAIN—HE'S PERFORMING HIS RITUAL CELEBRATORY MOVE—HE'S FLYING TOWARDS HIS SEEKER—HE'S GOING TO TRY TO HUG HER, AND WE ALL KNOW HOW THAT ALWAYS TURNS OUT...”

But instead of pushing him halfway down the pitch, as she usually did, Maureen Knight threw her arms around Oliver and kissed him. There was a blinding light as a thousand flashbulbs popped.

Hermione looked at her program for the first time in hours. “Well, that would be a personal reason to leave the team,” she said.

Laughing, Ginny held her cracker over her head and yanked it at both ends. A bolt of orange light shot out of it and zoomed out into the sky. When it was right over the center of the pitch, it exploded in a burst of orange fireworks and zooming black cannonballs made of smoke. The crowd cheered.

Harry pulled his cracker next, and then Hermione did hers. They shook Ron awake, dragged him to his feet, and handed him one of his own. The four of them stood in the top box and set off fireworks until there were none left, cheering with all their might as the Cannons zoomed around the pitch in a victory lap and flew together in a massive, tangled hug.

Anything was possible, Harry thought, pulling the last cracker and watching it explode triumphantly in the sky. Anything at all.

Epilogue

Harry's stomach had never let him down, and now was no exception. He felt as though flobberworms were slowly coiling through it, and he knew that he was nervous. He'd known about Godric's Hollow—it was always mentioned in reference to the “night that Lily and James Potter were killed,” but he'd so far managed to avoid putting any time in thinking about the place where he was born.

The copper-colored box sitting on his bed gleamed as a sunbeam came shooting through his window. Harry had noticed it in his vault at Gringotts during one visit when he'd accidentally knocked over several large stacks of gold Galleons. The box, which had probably been in a prominent position when it had been placed in the vault by his parents, had been buried underneath the years of interest that had accumulated. He'd forced himself not to be curious and ignored it. But he'd risen early on this day off and made a special trip to Gringotts to retrieve it. He didn't know what was inside, but the impending trip to Godric's Hollow with Sirius this afternoon had awakened Harry's curiosity, and he was suddenly anxious to learn whatever he could about his parents before visiting the home where they'd lived.

Sitting down next to the box on the bed, Harry let his finger trace the crest that had been engraved into the metal. It looked very old; so many things in the wizarding world looked that way that it surprised Harry that he noticed it. But it made him wonder—exactly *how* old? Had this been in his family for centuries? Did his family go back for centuries? Obviously, they'd had to start somewhere. Who had made this box? Had it been one of the people he'd seen in the Mirror of Erised during his first year at Hogwarts?

Harry looked at his watch. Hermione was probably already at St. Mungo's. She might know some good books where he could look up family information. She'd probably already looked it up for him anyway, and was just waiting for the day when he would ask. Maybe the contents of the box would answer all of his questions. If only he could get it open. There was no lock, but the lid appeared to be on tightly, and none of the simple opening charms Harry had tried seemed to have an effect.

Maybe there was nothing in that box. Maybe it was filled with more Galleons, or perhaps only air. Maybe his parents had kept it simply because it was so old. Harry leaned forward and looked at the crest pattern carefully. Something was moving on it. He blinked to make sure that his eyes weren't playing tricks on him, and then looked again. The crest wasn't shaped like any crest he'd ever seen—it looked like a cauldron, and the cauldron's handle was standing upright. At the top, underneath the handle, the word “POTTER” was clearly written. And inside the crest was an odd-looking winged creature that almost resembled Buckbeak, Hagrid's hippogriff. It had a bird-like head and wings, but its feet and tail were like that of a lion.

“A gryffin...” said Harry. It looked ferocious and its wings were flapping. It seemed to be... swatting something. Upon closer inspection, Harry saw that a tiny Golden Snitch was circling the gryffin's head, weaving up and down and around, and then disappearing entirely from the crest, only to return a few seconds later in a new location.

“I guess I'm a Gryffindor,” Harry muttered, trying to anticipate where the Snitch would turn up next. “And I guess Quidditch has always been...”

A whirring noise interrupted him, and he was unable to move his head in time to avoid the Snitch, which had transformed into a real Snitch and soared out of the crest and off the surface of the box. It fluttered and flickered around his head.

“Hey!” Harry said, rubbing his forehead with one hand and reaching out with the other to try to catch the Snitch. The Snitch, however, had somehow made it across the room, and was now hovering above Harry's mirror. He'd never tried to catch a Snitch while on his feet, and he lunged for it, only to bang his thigh against the side of his wardrobe.

The Snitch flew under the bed, and Harry fell to the floor, ready to trap it between himself and the wall, but the Snitch flew past him, and Hedwig let out a screech as the Snitch circled her cage, bobbing up and down in the air. Harry stood and dusted himself off. His door was closed, and so

was his window. The Snitch wasn't going to get out of the room. Harry sat down on the bed to wait, and Hedwig shrieked again in annoyance.

Harry put a finger to his lips and rose again, slowly walking over to her cage. The door was open but she was sitting on her perch, trying to peck at the Snitch through the bars. The Snitch, meanwhile, seemed much more concerned with the owl than with Harry, and didn't seem aware that he was now within arm's reach. When he thought he was close enough, Harry reached out and wrapped his fingers tightly around the fluttering ball, losing his balance while doing so and falling into Hedwig's cage. Hedwig flew out, pecked his head briefly, and then hopped over to rest on his desk.

Harry looked at the wings that had stopped flapping in his grip, and wondered what he was supposed to do with this thing now that he'd caught it. He didn't have to think for long, however, because a moment later, the Snitch disappeared from his hand entirely, and the lid to the copper box on his bed popped open.

Pulling himself up off the floor, Harry limped back to the bed, and with a shaking hand, opened the lid all the way. His heart fell at first when he looked inside. The box appeared to be filled with gold. But after a moment, the gold disappeared like Leprechaun gold, and revealed a pile of neatly tied scrolls, parchment, and even wizarding photographs underneath.

He lifted the largest scroll from the top, and carefully unrolled it. It felt odd, as though it were made from some sort of animal skin instead of paper. There were many intricate designs drawn on it in inks that still sparkled, but the writing was very small and very difficult to read. There was a seal at the top that he didn't recognize. Harry pushed up his glasses and tried to decipher what it said.

CERTIFICATE OF MARRIAGE

This certifies that Bowman Wright, metal-charmer of the village of Godric's Hollow, and Lucinda Gryffindor, daughter of Roric Gryffindor, granddaughter of Eamund Gryffindor, great-granddaughter of Gyrth Gryffindor, and great-great-great-great-great-granddaughter of Godric Gryffindor, are united in marriage on the 19th day of the month that is called Junius, in the year 1522.

Harry had read about Bowman Wright in *Quidditch Through the Ages*. Wright had invented the Golden Snitch. Harry gasped. Could it be that Wright was a relative of his? Hands shaking with anticipation, Harry pulled another scroll out of the box, and unrolled it, although it was very stiff, and he had to hold onto the top and the bottom to be able to read it. This one had a map drawn on the back of it.

DEED OF LAND

Grant for life by Roric Gryffindor, chief warlock of Godric's Hollow, to Bowman Wright, son of Bartholomew Wright, and Lucinda, his wife, of all of his land in Godric's Hollow, namely between Potter's Spring and the boundary charm at Wilson's St. and the gate to the entrance of the Roman Road at a rent of 7 Golden Snitches per annum. Given at Godric's Hollow, Thursday next after the festival of All Hallow's Eve, 1523.

Turning over the parchment to look at the map, Harry noticed that it greatly resembled the hand-drawn map that Sirius had given him to study the previous evening. He traced the outline with his finger, stopping when he reached the building at the top of the hill. That was where he was supposed to be going today, but on Sirius's map, there was no building. This document was all about the village of Godric's Hollow.

Harry released the bottom of the land deed and it immediately rolled back up. He reached into the bottom of the box, past the photographs, to look at more of the scrolls. Some of them were made out of parchment, and Harry tried not to worry as bits and pieces of paper flaked off the edges and fluttered down to the floor. If there had been any doubt that these documents rightly belonged to him, it was disappeared with the third scroll he opened. It was another marriage certificate, this time for Katherine, daughter of Bowman Wright and ... Harold Potter, "maker of fine cauldrons." Harold Potter... Harry stopped and thought. No one had ever called him "Harold" before. He'd always assumed that his name was "Harry," but now he wondered. With all that he was learning this morning, nothing would surprise him now.

He kept looking, and found more marriage certificates, land deeds, death certificates, and his own birth certificate, which confirmed that he was, as he'd always thought, "Harry." That came as something of a relief. Eventually, he reached for the old, fading photographs. The wizards in

them looked tired and stiff, as if they'd been sleeping for years, which, Harry realized, they probably had. As he drew one closer to his face to have a look, the sour-looking witch and wizard who were standing in it smiled and stretched their arms. Then the man suddenly grabbed the woman and gave her a big kiss. Harry laughed, and he could have sworn that the man in the photograph winked at him.

Harry didn't know who they were, but they looked familiar. Everything looked familiar and he wasn't sure if he were imagining it because he wanted it to be, or if there really were resemblances. Maybe men in the olden days just didn't normally comb their hair. And the fact that every other picture showed a witch or wizard with a broomstick in hand seemed to Harry to mean that he came from a family of Quidditch lunatics.

Soon, the photographs turned to color and the dates on the documents reached the 1900s. One picture, in particular, caught his eye, and he had to do a double-take to make sure that he was seeing things correctly. It was the Gryffindor House Quidditch Team, 1942. They were holding the Quidditch Cup and beaming into the camera. There was a short boy in the front row that looked vaguely familiar, but he wasn't the one who drew Harry's attention. In the back row, a tall, angular girl—the only witch on the team—was smiling and holding onto one of the handles of the cup. She had dark hair that was pulled back tightly, and she looked very clever—she looked like...

"Professor McGonagall?" Harry said aloud and then looked more closely at the photograph. He could see writing coming through the people from the back, and he turned the photograph over to see names scrawled on the back. Harry had to assume that "*Minnie, haha!*" referred to Professor McGonagall. And the slight boy in the front row with the messy dark hair and the triumphant blush on his face was "*Me: Andrew Potter: Seeker Extraordinaire.*" Potter.

"Then he must be my..." *Grandfather*, Harry finished to himself. A grandfather. He had never, ever, let his mind wander that far—never considered his family past the parents who had died when he was just a baby. He had assumed they were dead, of course—he knew the Dursleys were his only living relatives. If his grandfather had lived, he'd be around Professor McGonagall's age, barely halfway through his long wizard life. Harry didn't know how his grandparents had died—it must have been something unnatural, or they would still be alive. A thousand more questions flooded Harry's brain, despite all the answers he had already received, and suddenly, he very much wanted his friends around him. Ginny. Ron. Hermione. He wanted to share all of this with them, and talk to them about it, the same way that Ginny and Ron proudly boasted about their brothers' accomplishments, or the way that Hermione spoke of her parents.

But he didn't have time to fetch them now. He checked his watch, afraid that he was late to meet Sirius. To his relief, Harry saw that he still had a few minutes before noon. He continued to be amazed at how much he could get done in the time when he might have been flying on Norbert, and wondered for a moment what he'd do with his all of his time now. Maybe he could go into business for himself crafting custom Snitches.

Entertaining himself for a moment with an image of himself standing over a workbench, carefully molding a piece of gold into a perfect round ball with his wand, Harry finally returned all of the documents to the copper box, slid it underneath his bed, checked his map one more time, and the Disapparated to Godric's Hollow.

* * * * *

Sirius had chosen an Apparition point on the outskirts of the village, and Harry found himself inside a cavernous room with no ceiling overhead—just blue, cloudless sky. No one else was there, and Harry panicked for a moment, wondering what type of trouble he might be in, when Sirius appeared next to him.

"My, you're punctual," Sirius said. He looked relaxed, and healthy, as though his weight had finally caught up with his height. It was amazing, really, how much of a difference a few good nights of sleep could make to a person.

"Not usually," Harry said. "I was worried I'd Apparated to the wrong place. There's no building on the map."

"Yes, well... I'm not really an artist," Sirius answered. "I wanted to surprise you, and there was only the slightest possibility that we wouldn't be able to Apparate in here."

"What?" Harry sputtered, suddenly envisioning half of himself atop the turrets he could see looming overhead, while the other half of him walked around without a torso at the bottom of the hill.

Sirius shrugged. "I was really the only one in danger," he said. "None of the wards on this place would have stopped the heir of Gryffindor from entering."

Sirius pointed to the sky, and when Harry followed his finger, he saw an alternating pattern of

gryffins and lions carved into the top of the stone walls.

"We're inside the Gryffindor Manor?" Harry said slowly. "Then this is...still here?"

"You knew about it?" Sirius asked. "How?" He sounded disappointed.

Harry told Sirius all about the copper box and what he'd found inside. Or most of it. He didn't mention his grandparents, although he desperately wanted to know. Something told him it wouldn't be a happy story, and he didn't want to ruin the mood of the day.

"Well, I imagine it's all yours," Sirius said. "There are copies of all of the legal documents in the Ministry Archives. You are the last in the line of Gryffindors—Roric was the last official male to carry that name, I believe—there were nothing but daughters for centuries once the Potters came into the family. Actually," Sirius paused, as if for effect, "I think you own the whole village at the bottom of the hill."

"Can Muggles see this?" Harry asked, thinking how wonderful it would be to live in a castle and to fix it up with his own Great Hall and a room for his broomsticks. True, it didn't seem to be an exceptionally large place. "Let's go look at the rest," he said, heading towards the opening that had once held a door.

"Oh, they can see it," Sirius assured him. "And they think *they* own it. There's a sign outside that says, 'Property of the National Trust: Not Open to the Public at Present. Beware Falling Stones.'"

"Really?" Harry said. "What do you think they want to do with it? Do you think they'd notice if it were repaired?"

They'd entered a large entrance hall. Sunlight poured through the enormous opening where the main gate used to be. The light showed that the stone was crumbling all over the place. Harry heard a soft howling noise, and swiveled around, trying to see where it had originated.

"Are there ghosts?" he asked, feeling a bit excited. Ghosts here might be his relatives. A thrill shot through Harry as he imagined himself dining with his great-great-great-great grandfather sitting across the table from him.

"Birds," Sirius said, pointing up towards the ceilings. "You could fix this up, you know, with a little bit of magic here and there. But let's come back—no one's lived here for centuries, and you want to see—"

Sirius had grabbed onto Harry's arm.

"What are you—?" Harry started to ask, but stopped as he realized that they were both teetering on the edge of a huge drop.

"There must have been some sort of drawbridge," Sirius said, balancing, and taking a step backwards. "We'll have to Apparate down to the village."

Harry waited for Sirius to disappear, and then, after a long, hopeful look around the entrance hall, pulled his wand and Disapparated. A minute later, he was standing on a shady road. A quaint village, not unlike Stagsden, except more bustling and open, spread out in front of them.

Turning his head, Harry looked back up the hill at the ruins of the manor. It looked as though it had once been much bigger, and the large stones that lay scattered around the part that was still standing did not look to be enough to make a whole building.

"I wonder what happened to the rest," Harry said.

"Well if no one was living in it, I expect people carted off the stones to build their own houses," Sirius said. "Maybe you can order the people of Godric's Hollow to return them to you."

Harry pushed him, and Sirius laughed. "Actually, your father knew about owning the land under Godric's Hollow," he said. "I think his family has always known. But he always used to say 'What would I do with a village?' which I always thought was a stupid question. Lots of things! But your father was too modest or something to do anything about it."

He could tell that Sirius was only half-joking, and in his voice, Harry could tell that Sirius really did feel as though owning a village might be a worthwhile possession. But he could understand his father's point of view. He didn't know the first thing about running a village. Besides, things were different now—as they began to walk towards the town, Harry could see signs of Muggles and modern conveniences—electrical wires, telephone poles, paved roads and cars. No, Harry decided, he definitely did not want to own a village. But it was certainly cool to have that castle up on the hill.

"Sirius," he asked. "Where did you come from? Before, I mean."

Sirius stopped walking and looked over at Harry, surprised. "No one's asked me that in years," he said. "I come from London, actually."

"Really? Do you still have family there?"

"No." Sirius shook his head. "My parents died when I was very young. I was raised mostly by my grandfather, and he ... died when I was in Azkaban."

It took a moment for this information to sink in, and when it did, Harry let out a breath. "So you were... you were an orphan?" he said. And then, quickly, when he saw an odd look pass over Sirius's face, "Sorry, if you don't want to talk about it--"

"No, it's all right, Harry. I don't mind." Sirius smiled, though he looked sad. "My grandfather was a wonderful man. I was lucky to have him. It was nothing like being raised by the Dursleys. He came to see me in Azkaban right before he died. Told me he didn't believe that I was guilty—I've only just remembered that—the Dementors sucked it out of my consciousness as soon as he left. It's made a big difference, knowing that."

"I'll bet," Harry said, not sure what else to say. "Did you know *my* grandfather?" he burst out, before he could stop himself.

"I did," Sirius said, the color returning to his face. "Another fine man. Always had sweets in his pockets. Remus was especially fond of him. He died before you were born."

"Okay," Harry said. He didn't want to learn more just yet. He had all the time in the world to learn what had happened to his family, to other peoples' families. The second war with Voldemort had caused death and destruction, and Harry couldn't imagine living through it a second time. Yet all these people—Sirius, Remus, Arthur and Molly Weasley—they'd all lived through two giant wars, the second as awful as the first. He was only just learning how to deal with his own losses—he needed some more time to fully absorb all of theirs.

Sirius seemed to understand. He tugged at Harry's sleeve. "Come on," he said. "Let's go see the village."

Godric's Hollow seemed to Harry to be a fun sort of place. It was a bit larger than Hogsmeade, and all of the Muggles made it seem much more fast-paced. A bus honked its horn behind them and Harry and Sirius scrambled onto the pavement to let it pass. People seemed to be on their lunch breaks, and as they neared the main square, more and more people seemed to be coming in and out of shops, or sitting by the small fountain in the center, eating their sandwiches and crisps.

Harry suddenly felt very out of place, even though both he and Sirius were dressed in jeans. He'd never really been a part of this world. Even when he had lived with the Dursleys. As they crossed the square, and turned down a sort of long alley, Harry saw an elderly woman dressed in what looked like robes making her way slowly down the street towards them. The sight of another magical person made him breathe a sigh of relief.

"This is a part of town that most Muggles rarely visit," Sirius said, stopping in front of several garbage bins near the end of the alley. "That's a pub--"

"Goodness me! It's Harry Potter!" said the witch Harry had noticed. She was in front of them now, and she clutched one of the bins to balance and put her other hand over her heart. "My boy," she said, tears brimming in her eyes.

Harry felt himself blush, but for once, he didn't feel like running away. He gave her a nervous sort of smile. Sirius made a snorting sound.

"My boy," she said again. "I'm so proud of you! And so grateful. I don't think I could have lived through another war. But you! You've made sure that won't happen."

Not knowing how to answer, Harry just nodded and said, "Thank you," as politely as he could. This sent her into a monologue about how polite and well-mannered he was. Just as Harry was coming up with a good excuse for them to continue, the woman reached out and touched Sirius's arm.

"And you! I always knew you were innocent. You don't remember, but I saw you and your friends in the Purple Pony quite often. My husband and I used to go there every Friday night for fish and chips. They still have the best. One night someone started a fight with Christopher—my late husband—and you stood up for us. I'll never forget that. I told people you were innocent, but do you think anyone listened to an old lady like me?"

She seemed to be waiting for an answer.

"No?" guessed Sirius, sounding both amused and affectionate.

"Of course they didn't! But I was right, wasn't I? You're a good man, Mr. Black."

"Oh, I don't know about *that*," Sirius began, but she interrupted him.

"Don't argue with me! I'm *right*!"

This time Harry laughed. "Thank you," Sirius said. "Thank you very much."

"You're welcome." The woman nodded happily to both of them and continued on down the road behind them.

After she was out of earshot, Sirius cleared his throat, but Harry could tell he looked pleased. "And as I was *saying*, Harry. Over there is the Purple Pony, home of Christopher's Defense, fish and chips, and Butterbeer that always tasted slightly off. We used to spend a lot of time there.

Wonderful times.”

“Are we near where my parents lived, then?” Harry felt something like a terrible lead weight fill his stomach. The house where he had been born. Where his parents had lived. Where they had died. He had never tried to picture it before. He had his memories—a green light, a cradle, a wooden floor. Sometimes he thought he could remember the smell, and other times he thought he could also feel the wind across his face as he rode with Hagrid on a motorbike to the Dursleys. But he didn’t know which memories were real, and which he’d wanted to be real. And try as he might, he could remember nothing about his parents except what he had been forced to remember later.

They turned back onto a main road, and continued walking. It seemed that they were heading towards the end of town. They stopped at an intersection and waited for the cars to pass.

“It’s on the outskirts,” Sirius said. It’s a little bit like Lupin Lodge—more in the countryside. It was an old house, and the town sort of grew up around it.”

As they walked, Harry tried to picture an old house like the Notch or Lupin Lodge, set back from the road—surrounded, perhaps, by a huge, colorful hedge. Perhaps his parents had a garage, like Mr. Weasley. He wondered how large the house was, and if, once inside, he would recognize anything.

The houses now were growing further apart. They turned again, this time into a sort of enclave, where several small houses stood, spaced far apart. There was no pavement in this neighborhood, only a rough road, and Harry thought for a moment that it might be an entirely wizarding community, until a car squeezed past them and ambled roughly down the street.

“Are there many witches and wizards here?” Harry asked, as they passed another house that was closer to the road. Harry could see a television on through the window.

“Not as many as there used to be, I’m sure,” Sirius said. “Godric’s Hollow was always an odd place—Muggles and wizards living next door to each other, each accepting the other as “eccentric” without actually paying too much attention to what was really going on. I told your father that a real Black and Potter success would be getting a Muggle in Godric’s Hollow to admit that they’d seen something strange. But he was always very protective... never let me pull any pranks here.”

Harry smiled to himself. People were always telling him he looked like his father. And Sirius often told him he acted like his father, and usually it was when he thought Harry was being particularly stubborn or difficult. For the first time, Harry really appreciated that he understood his father. He didn’t feel embarrassed, or shy, or affronted. He wanted Sirius to tell him more.

Sirius was slowing down, peering into each yard as they passed. “It looks a bit different these days,” Sirius said. “Some of these people have put up fences, or taken down trees... there used to be...”

He stopped, looked up at the house in front of them, which was set back from the road and surrounded by a low, wooden fence. Harry felt a thrill of anticipation as he looked at the house, which looked cozy and welcoming. Was this it?

“Sixty-one,” Sirius read. “No, it was down a few more. Yes. It’s two more blocks.”

“Are you sure you were never Memory-charmed?” Harry joked, trying to mask his disappointment. He wished that Sirius had just arranged for them to Apparate directly to the address. All of this anticipation was making him feel ill.

“Well,” Sirius said. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

Sirius was walking more quickly now, looking relaxed, and casually peering into the gardens of the houses that they passed. Occasionally he would make a comment like “I guess the nasty dog who lived there is gone by now,” or “that one was a hunter—nearly had a heart-attack when he saw Prongs on his lawn one night.”

Harry checked each house number as they went by. He felt stupid for not remembering which house had belonged to his parents. It had been written on one of the documents in the copper box, but he hadn’t paid much attention. Still, they must be getting close. Eighty-one. Eighty-three. Eighty-five. Eighty-nine. They kept walking—the houses on this section of street were further apart than they had been earlier. Ninety-one...

“Sirius,” Harry said, stopping. “Shouldn’t we be there by now? You said two more blocks back there, and now we’re at the third.” He hoped he didn’t sound too eager. Sirius looked puzzled.

“What’s the number on that house, then? Ninety-one? Yes, we have gone too far.” He turned, and started back in the other direction. Was it eighty-nine? No, they walked passed that one. Sirius was slowing down. It must be eighty-five, then.

Running a bit to catch up with Sirius, Harry was surprised to discover that he had stopped right in-between eighty-nine and eighty-five. The land here was also surrounded by an old-looking wooden fence. It wasn’t neatly cared-for like the one earlier had been. It seemed to be made of large, unfinished logs, and held together by each other rather than by nails. There was no gate—only an

opening in the fence.

Sirius looked very pale.

"Which is it?" Harry asked excitedly. He peered past Sirius into the garden. It must belong to one of the houses on either side. Beautiful, tall trees formed a semi-circle around the perimeter of the garden, and in the middle was a magnificent array of flowers, all in bloom in bright scarlets and yellows and violets. It was not quite wild and useful, like the garden at Lupin Lodge, and neither was it pristinely manicured and maintained for no apparent reason like Aunt's Petunia's garden.

"Sirius?" Harry said, for Sirius was now leaning on the fence, both of his hands supporting him. He looked as though he might faint.

"Sorry," he said, not looking at Harry. "I didn't expect... I *knew*, but I didn't expect it to get to me this much. It looks beautiful. I wonder who made that garden..."

"The garden wasn't there before?"

Shaking his head, Sirius turned to face Harry. "The trees were there. Around the house. Which used to stand right in the center there."

Harry felt the bottom drop out of his stomach entirely. It was a moment before he could speak.

"Used to stand? You mean... the house was here. And now it's ... it's gone?" He tried to comprehend what was happening. "You said we were coming to see the house and I thought—" he stopped when he saw the look on Sirius's face.

"I—I thought you knew. I said we were going to see where your parents lived. The house was destroyed, Harry."

"No," Harry said, feeling as though he'd just lost something he'd never had. "I never thought—I don't know, I just assumed that—I mean, where was I? I know how I survived Voldemort, but how did I survive an entire house falling down? What happened?"

"It burnt down, Harry. I don't know how. By the time I arrived, the house was gone. I mean, parts of it were still here. But it was mostly ashes. Your parents were on the ground... dead, but without a mark. And you were just... sitting there."

Harry had a sudden vision of himself as an infant, falling from the second floor to the ground floor, tumbling amidst the debris. A small baby among the splintered wood and nails and heat and death, his whole world collapsing around him and beneath him and on top of him.

It was impossible that he had survived. He suddenly understood why "Harry Potter" had been such a big deal to the wizarding world. That he was alive was a miracle. Harry had an urge to pinch himself to make sure that he was actually real, because he was no longer really sure.

"Damn!" Sirius said, under his breath. "Damn! I knew I would mess this up!"

Harry pinched himself anyway, before answering. "What do you mean?"

"*This* is why they never should have made me godfather, Harry. I never think. And look what it's done. I've ruined it all. They should have made Remus the godfather. He wouldn't muck things up like I do."

"Remus has mucked plenty of things up," Harry said. "You're both great." He wanted to explore the garden. If he couldn't be inside the house, standing where the house used to be would be the next best thing.

"Do you think you can remember where you found me?" he asked, taking a step through the gap in the fence.

Sirius looked relieved. "I think so. When we find it, we should mark it somehow; I've wanted to show Remus."

Harry stopped. Suddenly, he wanted Ginny there with him. He wanted to share this experience with more than just one person. And he wasn't sure if he'd want to come back anytime soon.

"Wait," he said. "Why don't you go get him?"

"What? Get who?"

"Remus. Let's Disapparate, fetch them. And Ron and Hermione too, and bring them back."

Sirius looked a little bit relieved. "Are you sure? It will violate our Black and Potter code."

"Rules," Harry said, trying to sound wise, "were made to be broken. It won't take long. Ginny's at Lupin Lodge. So's Remus. I'll go get them, and you find Ron and Hermione—Ron left early for the Ministry and he's bound to know where Hermione is."

"Meet back here in a few minutes?" Sirius was already walking towards a large tree, where he could hide and Disapparate.

Harry followed, and a moment later he was standing in the study at Lupin Lodge. Remus was sitting behind the desk, looking over what seemed to be an official Ministry document. He looked up in surprise at Harry.

"You didn't want to walk down the stairs?" he asked.

"I wasn't upstairs," Harry said. "I was with Sirius. I've come to fetch you. And Ginny, is she upstairs?"

"Reading, I think," Remus said. "She was looking into something for the Longbottoms." He stood up and stretched. "Where are we going? Do I need any special tools for this journey?"

Harry shook his head. "Just wait here until I've got Ginny. I'll explain to you both at once." And with that, he ran up the stairs, two at a time, and paused outside of Ginny's door, which was half open.

Ginny was sitting on the floor, books piled around her. Harry was reminded of last summer, when she'd confided in him that she wanted to make the Wolfsbane Potion. He stood for a moment, watching her, knowing that she could probably tell he was there, but still taking advantage of the moment to study her as she worked.

Her blush told him that she definitely knew he was there, and he took it as an invitation into the room.

"Hi," she said. "It's still strange to see you at home at this time of day."

"Thanks, I can leave if you want."

"No!" Ginny shifted some books and patted the floor next to her. "It's nice. Have a seat."

"I can't stay," Harry said, reaching out a hand to her. "And neither can you. It's time for a break."

Ginny looked down at her Healer text, obviously torn. "Well... is it outside?" she asked. "It's a beautiful day."

"It is. Come downstairs. Remus is coming too, it won't take long."

"Where are we going?"

A thrill ran through Harry as he walked with Ginny down the stairs. Somehow, he felt like this might be the most special thing that they'd ever done. It was a good feeling to have a surprise for someone. Ginny was constantly surprising him with words, or letters, or just with actions. Only rarely had Harry truly felt as though he'd had something to share. He remembered how he had felt the night that Ginny had successfully wakened the Grangers—when she had seemed to relax at his touch. This feeling was similar.

He didn't answer her until they reached the study, where Remus was standing in the center of the room reading a book, which he put down when Harry and Ginny entered the room.

"Are you going to enlighten us now?" Remus asked.

"Yes." Harry said, and he pulled the map out of his pocket and put it on the desk. "We're going to Godric's Hollow."

"What?" Remus said, examining the map more closely. "Did Sirius draw this?"

"Yes, he's gone to get Ron and Hermione and they'll meet us there. I want you all to be there with me to see where my parents lived."

Ginny squeezed his arm and looked at him as though she were very, very proud of him. Remus, however, looked apprehensive.

"He's got you Apparating to the top of the hill, where the ruin of the old manor is located," Remus said slowly. "Harry—did Sirius tell you anything about your parent's house?"

Harry couldn't help smirking. Sirius had been right, in a way. Remus was much better at preparing people for unpleasant things. Perhaps that had been why he'd been such a good Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.

"We've just come from there," Harry told him. "It's okay, Remus. I know." He turned to Ginny. "The house isn't there anymore. But it's fine. *Really*," he said, when she raised her eyebrows. "The house is quite a ways off from here, on the other side of town," he explained to Ginny. "I haven't got a map for that part, but if we Apparate together, you should be able to get to it."

Ginny nodded and pulled out her wand, still holding onto his arm. Together, they Apparated to Godric's Hollow.

When they arrived, Sirius, Ron and Hermione were already there. Harry imagined that Sirius had not given them much time to discuss things.

Sirius was standing against the fence, talking with an elderly woman. He waved when he saw Harry, Remus and Ginny, and beckoned them over.

"Here's Harry now," he said. The woman looked around at them, astonished. "Where did you lot come from?" she asked. "I didn't see you come in the gate."

From this, and the way that she was dressed, Harry guessed that she was a Muggle. She shook her head, as if she felt she were imagining things, and held out a hand to him. "I'm Mrs. Blythe," she said, kindly.

"I'm Harry," he said. "And this is Ginny. And Remus."

The woman looked shocked. "Remus! I hardly recognized you—you've both grown, I suppose."

You'll be forever young men in my eyes though." Sirius patted his hair self-consciously and from the way that the corner of his mouth turned up, Harry could tell that he wanted to laugh.

"And you. I used to look after you, you know. When you were a baby. And now, you've grown. And you look *just* like your father. He was such a nice young man. And your mother—a beautiful girl. I knew your grandparents, too. It was such a sad, sad day when the Potter house burned down—it's just lucky that your parents were on holiday when it happened."

Harry tried not to feel sick.

"Mrs. Blythe is the one who has been tending the garden," Sirius explained.

"I hope you don't mind," she said to Harry.

"Mind?" said Harry, recovering. "It's brilliant."

"Oh! I'm so glad you like it," she said, clasping her hands together. "I had to do *something*. Such tragedy—your parents dying in that car accident the very next day—although I wasn't surprised, *I'd* never seen them drive a car, you see. And then I heard that you were with relatives in the north, which *was* a bit of a surprise—your mother said she wasn't on speaking terms with her family. Still, I assumed that someone would be back to sell the property, but no one came, so I decided to start the garden. Of course, you'll be wanting to build on it now, I suppose?"

She ended her monologue with an imploring look at Harry, and he shook his head. He looked out over the garden. Hermione was walking the perimeter of the garden, looking down at the plants with an intent look on her face. Ron was hanging back by a tree; he held up a hand to Harry when he noticed Harry looking his way.

Even though she was a Muggle, Mrs. Blythe certainly had a magical way with plants. His parents had lived here. A house had once stood right where the foxgloves and buttercups mingled in the center of the lawn. Had that strawberry patch near the back belonged to his parents, or had Mrs. Blythe planted the berries later? Before they'd arrived, before he'd *known*, he had entertained the idea of living in his parents' house. His family's house. But now, somehow, he didn't see the point. Bad things had happened here, and as beautiful as the garden was, he didn't think he could ever visit this place without thinking of that.

Ginny put an arm around his waist. She leaned her head against his and said, very quietly, "Don't dwell on it, Harry. You're here. You *lived*."

She was right.

He turned back to answer Mrs. Blythe. "I think you've done a lovely job with the garden," he said. "I want to leave it like this."

Mrs. Blythe looked visibly relieved, and began to thank Harry profusely. Remus stepped in to ask her how her strawberries had done, and she invited them over to the patch to taste for themselves.

Harry stayed back, his arm around Ginny now, and leaned against the fence to look out over the garden. Hermione had stopped walking and was kicking at something in the dirt. Ron wandered over to her. "What's wrong," Harry heard him ask. "Dogs not cleaning up for themselves these days?"

But Hermione wasn't listening. She'd knelt down in the grass and started clearing away something with her hands.

"There's something here!" Hermione said, reaching out her arm and clearing more dirt. "Harry! Come here!"

She stood up as Harry and Ginny approached, and dusted off her hands. Then, to Harry's amusement, Hermione stomped on the ground several times with her foot. He heard a hollow *thunk* as her foot came in contact with the ground, and he hurried forward for a better look.

"Harry, there's something under the garden—I think this is a door!"

Hermione, as usual, was right. It did appear to be a door—a heavy, metal door with a large, round, metal handle. It was rusted and dirty, and part of it was buried under several inches of turf.

"The cellar..." Ron said. "It must be a cellar of some kind." He turned to survey the property. "Yes. If the house started there, which makes sense because of where the trees are, then the outdoor cellar would be just about here."

He looked at Harry, whose heart was thudding so loudly that he was sure they could all hear it.

Harry looked back, in silent agreement, and a moment later, they got down to their knees, checked to make sure that Mrs. Blythe was fully occupied, and removed the dirt and grass from the door.

"Hermione," said Ron, sliding his wand back into his belt, "will you do the honors?"

Hermione nodded, pulled out her wand, swished and flicked, and said, "*Alohomora!*"

The rusty handle turned with a creak, and slowly, the doors started to open upwards from the ground. Harry and Ron both hastily grabbed onto a door, to make sure that Mrs. Blythe wouldn't

see, but she was heading back towards her house. Remus and Sirius, however, started to walk towards them.

When the doors were finally open, a musty, earthy smell came up from the hole. Harry, who was used to having to face dark, endless holes leading nowhere, was happy to see a set of stone steps leading down into the cellar.

"I didn't know they had a cellar," Remus said, bending down to peer inside.

"Neither did I," Sirius said, "and I thought I knew everything."

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Ginny asked, prodding Harry in the back with her foot. "You go first."

Carefully, Harry put his foot on the first step. It was very dark. "*Lumos*," he said, and the stairs illuminated below him. There weren't many, but he was able to stand upright when he reached the bottom. It was much colder here, and he shivered for a moment.

Ginny had followed him; the rest not far behind. Soon they were all down there, and Hermione conjured a lantern with a bluebell flame, which she set in the center of the stone floor. Soon an eerie blue light flickered and danced off the walls and the floor.

The room was empty. He tried not to be annoyed with his parents for a moment—had they been so neat and orderly that they hadn't left things lying around? He was certain that if this were his cellar, it would not be so pristine.

Then again, they *had* left that copper box at Gringotts for him. And the Kinolia—they'd left that with Sirius. And the Invisibility Cloak—somehow, Dumbledore had ended up with that and passed it on to him. Lily and James had seen to it that he'd inherited the things that mattered most. What did a *house* mean, really? Maybe his parents hadn't known about the cellar either.

Maybe they'd never been here.

Harry wandered around the small room, breathing the musty air and looking for something, anything, that would indicate that his parents had been here—that this had been a part of their house. Something that would make him feel as if he'd been a part of their family.

When he'd finished circling the room, Harry looked up and saw that Ron and Hermione were standing near the stairs; Ron had his arm around Hermione's shoulders. Both were watching him. Sirius was leaning against the wall, looking lost, and Remus was standing near Ginny; both appeared to be trying to warm their hands from the feeble light of the bluebell flame.

This was his family. Harry smiled at Ginny, and was afraid that he could feel the tears forming in his eyes as he did so. But he was no longer sad. He no longer felt lost. He crossed the room to where Ginny and Remus were standing, and a moment later, he was surrounded on all sides as everyone in the room fused together in a tight and protective embrace. Someone kicked the bluebell flame, which flickered out and left them all in darkness, but no one moved to right it.

Harry shut his eyes and leaned his head heavily on Ginny's shoulder, taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly.

He was home.

A/N: Thank you, B Bennett and Cap'n Kathy, who were the first to read and review, in person and in pen, sitting on the floor of Zsenya's apartment and accidentally throwing knives at each other, when AtE was still a two hundred page stack of paper that never actually made it into the final document. You read every single draft, didn't you? For two and a half years? You poor hapless souls. Just when you thought the wait for canon could get no more painful.

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Canon. Tonight. What the hell are you all doing reading THIS?